

GODS AND HEROES

The Story of Greek Mythology

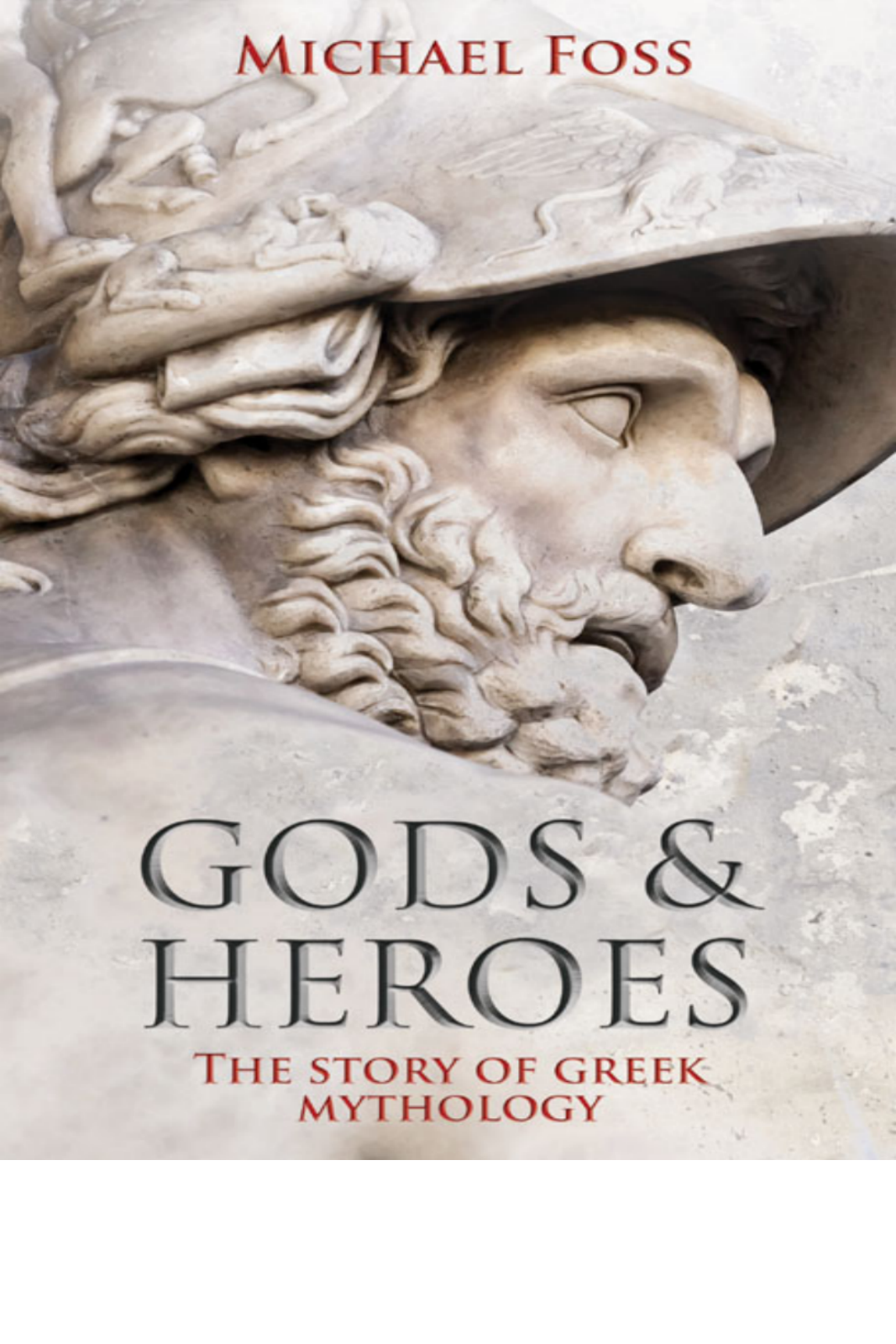
MICHAEL FOSS



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THE STORY OF GREEK
MYTHOLOGY

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MICHAEL O'MARA BOOKS LIMITED

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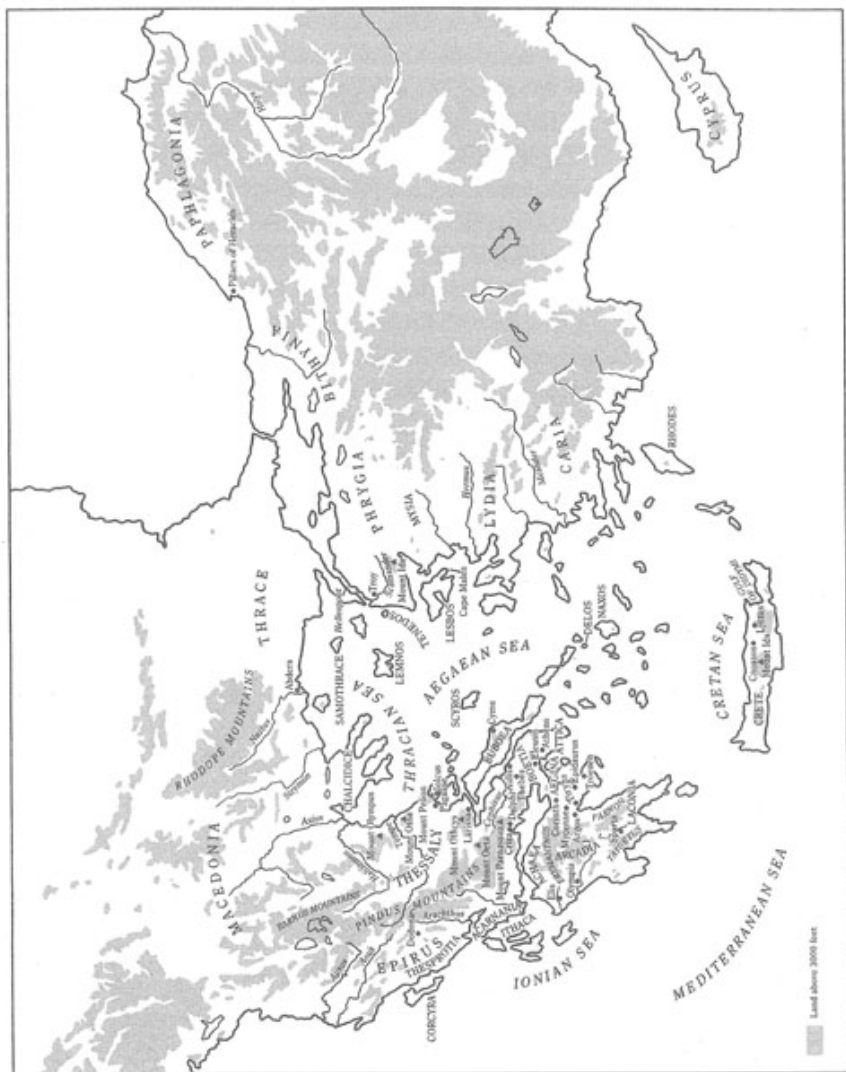
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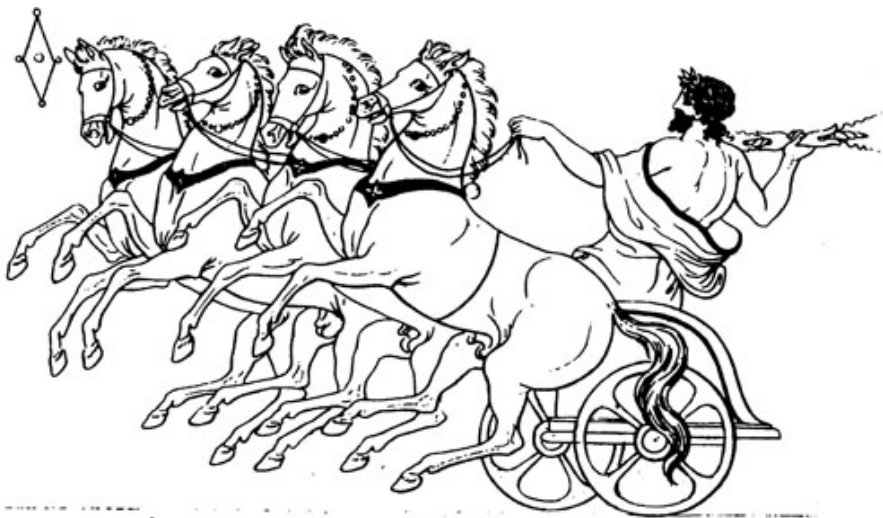
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– Part One –

THE HEAVENLY ONES



Zeus

THE ANCIENT ONES

AS USUAL, the changing seasons caught Mantes in the midst of his travels. Ever since he began to follow his ancient calling – minstrel and storyteller – the road had been his destiny. Now he was coming south from the badlands of Thrace. Early in the year, in the wretched month of Lenaeon, winds that would take the skin off an ox drove him out of the horse-breeding uplands. In those far borderlands, where the wilderness was full of menace from wild men and wilder beasts, who knew when the Fates would flick a life away, like a discarded olive stone?

Once, many years ago, he had not feared those dangerous paths. His stories, and his youth, gave him confidence. He felt he could overcome whatever time and the gods might throw at him. What he had to say – the message that he passed on through the gift of poetry – made him in some sense an accomplice of the Fates. Of course, no man could read their implacable will. They snipped the thread of life whenever they pleased. But it seemed to him that, like certain cunning animals, they only struck when they scented the smell of mortality. He was not contaminated by the stink of death. On the contrary, in his poetry he carried forward the words that gave meaning to life, and his voice was clear and resonant.

But the years on the road had punished him. Mantes was now far from young, and after more than thirty years of travelling he was thin and a little bent, his grizzled hair combed by the wind, his exposed skin as rutted as the path and the colour of faded leather. His step was slow. In the north, the chill morning air made him stiff from an old thigh wound. He faltered more often than he would like to admit, for his eyesight was failing. The voice alone was still strong.

He was glad to be going south. When he sang in the courts of the north, in draughty halls clapped by wind-blown shutters, with his eyes smarting in the smoke – in Thrace, in Chalcidice, even in Thessaly – to whom was he appealing? Tribal ruffians, robber barons, brigands with fresh blood on their hands. They dressed in skins and tore meat apart with brute strength. Gore, revenge, sacrifice, outlandish violence

pleased them best. Oh, how they roared and stamped, making the dogs growl beneath the benches. Mantes recalled what the great teacher Homer had said, when he told of the twelve Trojan prisoners killed on the funeral pyre of Patroclus, to assuage the wrath of Achilles – the only example of human sacrifice in all that noble epic. What was Achilles but a Thessalian, as cruel as the whirlwind, a chieftain of barbarous appetites? So Mantes was pleased to have come down the coast road safely, past the craggy massifs of Olympus and Ossa which threw fearful shadows and cramped the narrow trail towards the dark breakers of the Thracian sea. Then the mountains drew back to the west, giving way to rolling uplands studded with pine and pasture. The bleak stretch of the sea, to east and south, began to be colonized by islands. The sky seemed wider, the sun warmer. In this land, the beds were softer, well-fitted doors kept the night air at bay, wine was poured with a free hand. Between household and rich household, the way was easier. Mantes had his dog, his laurel staff – and the road. They had become companions, wound together by the will of the gods.

Trength out of an old man. He stopped to rest by a wayside marker though it was early in the year, the midday sun still drew the which men called a herm, in honour of the god Hermes. A cairn of stones was topped by a stone phallus, reminding travellers that Hermes, messenger and guardian of the road, was also the joker, the jack-in-the-box, the chaser of all females, goddess, nymph or mortal. He was – and had proved himself to be – a god of fertility. The pile of stones on the grass-verge threw a little shade into which Mantes and the dog both sank gratefully. How benevolent the gods were! Mantes reflected, providers of numberless blessings to those who respected them. But a god could be both a friend and a danger. The works of man had become many and complicated. It was necessary for the immortals of Olympus to extend their influence in a way that was wide-ranging, puzzling, and hard for humanity to know.

Reclining in shadow, Mantes let his imagination go over the countryside. Though his sight was now growing dim, many years of wandering these parts had impressed the terrain on his mind's eye. He knew the repose and order of the land under a startling clear light. Even the bad weather was dramatic – a revelation. Field, woodland, meadow, scrub hillside slowly shifted mood and colour from dawn to dusk, changes that were as formal and evocative as a change in music. A white temple on a distant headland in Euboea winked in the sun like a beacon until night put it out. This was the country of Boeotia, a place of good earth. The few small homesteads of the farmers were

lapped by tilled and cultivated ground, offering up the seasonal reward for age-old human effort. These farmers told an old tale, as anonymous and almost as long-lived as time itself. It was sufficient for them to follow their fathers' wisdom.

Mantes met them often on the path. Even in good times they seemed to carry a heavy burden. Though the ass carried the load to market, the farmer trudged behind just as wearily, groaning and moaning, weighed down by his destiny. Truly, his life was laborious, in all the senses of that word. Was the sun shining today? Well, that cloud on the distant mountain would dump a plentiful bucket of rain before the milking was done.

'Friend,' Mantes had called out that very morning to a man hoeing around his olive trees, 'how goes it? Earth-shaking Poseidon sleeps, is it not so? and all is well.'

That was altogether too much high spirits. The man reddened and looked aside. He would not answer. He went on plying the hoe, stabbing the ground like a man with a grudge. Mantes imagined the sentence of his ancestor forming in his mind: 'Sparing speech is more than gold; a tongue that seldom moves saves up treasure.' Besides, only the reckless speak lightly of the gods. It's easy to spew out talk, and then the mischief is done. What's left is hard to bear and difficult to get rid of. 'Talk by many people,' said the voice of the ancestors, 'never wholly dies away; even Talk is in some ways divine.'

Mantes smiled. Yes, it was mischievous of him to provoke these countrymen. He knew their set and stubborn ways. Many times he had been in their houses and taken their bread. He knew their solemn, crabbed and cautious rituals. In the dawn, they carefully washed their hands before making a libation to the gods. 'Or else,' they said, 'the holy ones spit back your prayers.' There was always a proper way to do things. Conceive a child in festival-time only – to make love after a funeral was ill-omened. Do not make water facing the sun. A boy who sits on the tombs of the dead is a lout and needs whipping. Marry a virgin five years past puberty and teach her carefully, or your marriage will be a joke with the neighbours. Let the feast-days be simple, with more conversation than food; and remember, when the guests come, not to cut your nails, and never leave the ladle in the wine bowl. Caulk the chinks in the house, or the crow will settle there and croak your fate. A man should not wash in water already used by a woman. In particular, do not make a mock of mysteries, for Heaven also can be angry.

A farmer's business was with land, weather and season. On a winter evening years ago, when the wind made the woods roar and even the shaggy cattle had their tails between their legs, a farmer, surprisingly talkative for a Boeotian, had given Mantes a lesson in his works and

days.

‘Pull up to the fire,’ he began hospitably. ‘Listen, poet, this is how it is with us. Keep the traditional ways and you’ll not go far wrong. Follow the lucky days, because sometimes a day is a step-mother and sometimes a mother. The first, fourth and seventh of the month are holy days. On the eighth, geld the boar and the bull. The tenth is a good day for a boy to be born, also for the taming of dogs and the schooling of mules and oxen. Do your shearing on the eleventh and twelfth, but the twelfth is particularly good, for that is the day when the spider spins her web and the ant gets busy about the nest. A woman who sets up her loom on this day finds the work easy. Then in the mid-month, cut the timber for the house beams and for the ribs of ships. The twentieth is favourable, but only in the morning. The twenty-seventh is an excellent day for many things: for opening wine jars, for yoking animals, for hauling boats to the water, though few people seem to know this now, nor do they call this day by its right name.

‘Well, that’s the good side of the coin. But of course there’s a dirty side also. Learn to avoid the ill-omened days. Only a fool plants on the sixth, or begins to sow on the thirteenth. The sixth will make do for fencing but it’s tricky for everything else. A boy born that day will be cunning and full of lies. But watch out for the fifth day. Oh, that’s terrible. Avoid it like the plague or the north wind. On that day the Furies, daughters of Night, conspire with Strife, making rods for the backs of men. But our fathers have shown us the right and wrong way to go about life, though we know well enough that nothing is certain. The will of Zeus, who holds the aegis, alters from time to time, and it is hard for mortal men to know what he wants.’

Once more, Mantes smiled at this memory. These peasants invoked the name of Zeus but Mantes perceived that the real deities whom they feared and struggled with all their lives were older and more obscure than the Olympian immortals.

In the lee of the stone herm, and fairly comfortable on the grassy wayside – his travels had made the world his living-room and the ground his bed – Mantes pondered the elemental facts: the coming into being, and the stability of the world. He was in no hurry. In an hour or so the worst of the heat would have gone from the sun. His old dog snuffled in the shade. Mantes had some milk curds and a flat loaf in his leather wallet.

In the matter of the oldest gods – the Ancient Ones – it was wise to mark the words of the poets. For what is a poet but the bearer of wisdom? There was a man called Hesiod – peace to his bones! – who lived and sang in this land of Boeotia. He, too, was a farmer. He knew the fields, the hills, the sea, the islands. Winter stung his body, stones

made the plough kick in his hands, flood and drought took turns to test him. Disease took the crops or laid low the mules. Yet in the long play of the seasons, unwinding year after year, Hesiod knew that Mother Earth gave forth all good things and sustained the generations of her children.

So Hesiod related the first mystery. There is a distant point where both knowledge and imagination stop. No mind, not even that of the poet, can go beyond. Behind that moment was the realm of Chaos, in which all matter was hidden. Ge, our Mother Earth, was the first and greatest of things to emerge out of Chaos. For without Earth nothing lives, not even the immortal gods who exist on the white peaks of Olympus, high on Earth's wide bosom. And Ge had with her from the beginning the dark pit called Tartarus, a place of troubles, sunk in the bowels of the ground. Then Eros arose, the one who quickens the loins and makes fools of the hearts of gods and men alike. Next, Darkness and Night, whom people call Erebus and Nyx, crept out of Chaos and, seeing there was as yet no light, lay together to bring forth Hemera, the day, and Aether, the luminous air.

By now, Chaos had produced place and time. The moment was ready for the generation of all that lives. What needed to be done? This is no secret to those who deal with crops and animals. Ge – Mother Earth – took it on herself to conceive without help. She strained and brought forth Uranus, the Heavenly Sky, who then covered her entirely and made fertile and productive everything that has a place in the ranks of nature.

That was how the people of Boeotia, that close-mouthed and practical folk, understood the things of the Earth. In the evening, when the household tasks were done, and the cattle chewed quietly in the byre, and the black cat prowled out into the dusk on nameless business, the families offered the day's thanks. A libation, naturally, to Zeus and the deathless gods, for safe-conduct through the dark reaches of the night. But in their hearts they offered a silent and deeper prayer to the Great Mother:

Earth is the mother of all, foundation of everything that is, eldest of beings and support of all nature and all humanity. Hail to the holy and boundless Goddess, Mother of Gods, and bride to the star-studded heavens.

All this Mantes had learnt from Hesiod, his predecessor, and now it was his task to tell this tale of creation in the halls of men. Was it a message that patriarchal man, day by day becoming more distant from the well-springs of Earth, wanted to hear? Legend related that the oracle of Delphi foretold the death of Hesiod, and he was duly murdered at Locris, perhaps for telling too much of the old truth. The nymphs washed his body, the goat-herds sprinkled offerings of milk

and honey on his grave. Countryfolk, at least, knew the value of the old man who had tasted at the Muses' pure spring.

By now, the heat had gone out of the day. Mantes roused the dog, clutched his staff and walked firmly but slowly down the path. The road was long and there was no farmhouse in sight to offer him a night's haven. Some gruel or a bite of meat was all he needed, a bowl of wine if he were lucky, and perhaps a straw pallet inside the door.

He walked far into the evening. To the east, the gulf of Euboea darkened like a metal mirror fogged with dew. Behind him, Mantes sensed the rising dusk. The wayside trees thickened with shadows. Rushing down from a hillside spring, a broad ribbon of water lay across the path, shivering in the half-light like the flank of a black horse. Before he waded the stream, Mantes paused. He spoke a brief prayer to the god of the river and washed his hands in the water as the rites prescribed. He wanted to urinate, but as he began to uncover he remembered that he was entering the realm of Night where none must defile either spring or stream. Quickly, he covered himself again and went on his way unrelieved.

Night, the Dark Nyx, coexisted with Ge before even Zeus was born. One must not offend, Mantes thought. Not Zeus, nor all the gods of Olympus, can withstand the secret power of these Ancient Ones.

And he went steadily on, towards the sound of dogs barking in the darkness.



The Storyteller

THE STRUGGLE

‘HOMER,’ MANTES was saying, in the confident voice of the professional storyteller, ‘greatest of poets, tells us that a rich house is a stately place, and that an assembly of princes is a good sight to see. But better still is a blazing fire on a filthy night when Zeus, son of Cronus, sends the shivering winter weather.’

It is the habit of storytellers to overdo the compliments. This house, where he had landed for the night, was no rich palace, and his host was no prince. He was a retired soldier who now farmed a rambling estate on the plains of Boeotia. The house – if not rich, at least large and comfortable – was set amid lonely fields surrounded by groves and orchards of good earth. Such a place was tempting to bandits and marauders. Men called this wide, productive land ‘the dance floor of Ares’, because the war-god had trampled here so often with invading or retreating armies. But the owner had remembered his military training and had surrounded his home with a steep bank of earth and a fierce hedge of prickly pears. Strangers were likely to turn aside when the dogs in the gatehouse strained at the leash; and those who ventured beyond the thorns and the barking found a brisk military welcome rather than the luxury of a prince.

But Boreas, the North Wind, was battering the roof and hooting in the chimney. Winter rain scudded across the courtyard and crept under the shutters. The host, who did not believe in small measures, had banked up a fire in the hall capable of putting a regiment of soldiers in a sweat. But Mantes was glad enough to be warm and under cover on such a night. There would be plenty of plain food, to go with the roaring fire, and in return for this hospitality only a story was needed.

Listening to the battle of the elements outside, Mantes decided to tell a tale of another, divine strife.

‘W e poets,’ he began, ‘sing of the glories of the immortals and of the deathless sagas of the heroes, but it’s hard for ordinary folk to know what we mean. We are a country people in the main,

peasants and farmers. For most of us the world ends where the fields stop, or where the river winds into the ravine, or where chestnut and beech straggle out into the sparse scrub and the blue rocks of the hills. What do our peasants care for the great tragedy of the House of Atreus, or for the clash of armies and gods on the plains of Troy? Too often, in the midst of our tales, we are interrupted by creaking voices of country folk: "That Aegisthus sounds like a bad lad. I knew a herdsman with a name something like that, up on the slopes of Mount Oeta. He was a bad one also. They say he cut the balls off a ram from a rival herd." Or "There was a Diomedes down our way, lived on the edge of the swamp. It takes a smart fellow to get out of the swamp and do well. I expect the Diomedes you're talking about was the same family."

'Country people understand best that the sky is their roof and the earth their floor. And between these bounds of nature they feel the tyranny of the land and the pressure of the seasons. Their life is a lottery. What is given with one hand is taken away with the other. The sum of their lives is work, and they do not look far beyond the wisdom of their fathers. They know the old saying: "The idle man who waits on empty hope, ignoring the tasks of the day, reaps a harvest of trouble. Winter will catch him helpless and poor, scratching his swollen foot with a thin hand."

'Mighty Zeus, had he so wished, could have allowed the earth to bring forth in a week enough to keep a prudent family for a year. Nature is kind. Her instructions, which all farmers must learn to follow, are simple. When the Pleiades set, towards the end of the year, harness the team and plough the fields. When they rise again in the spring, weed the crop, sharpen the sickle and make ready for the harvest. Those stars of the Pleiades – daughters of the Titan Atlas – will not let us down. In their constancy, they support the toil of farmers. But the gods are jealous. Too often, they kick the wheel of nature from its regular track, making burdens for the weary shoulders of mankind.'

The old soldier, listening to this beginning, was showing signs of impatience. He was hungry, waiting for the evening meal to be brought in, and in this mood his temper was not reliable. A poet, of course, liked to approach things in a roundabout way, but a soldier plunged straight in. He got up from his couch and prowled before the fire, cracking his knuckles and rubbing his old bones.

'Well, storyteller,' he interrupted, 'you're right about the burdens of mankind. But what's the explanation? I'm only an old campaigner with not much learning, but I know that there were gods before All Seeing Zeus. Puzzling beings, deities of earth and sky, of space and time. Giants and Titans, unruly broods spawned by Mother Earth,

fought in the childhood of time to make the world the dangerous place we know today. Not that we can ever avoid all conflict or opposition. We farmers know that nature must strike a balance. We pay for the good days with miserable ones, such as today. No land has the sole right to warmth and clear skies. At this time of year the chariot of Helius, the Sun-God, has appointments elsewhere. It's over Africa now, turning the people black. But we are satisfied if Helius makes his daily journey across the sky, even though from time to time it pleases Zeus to hide the sun with thunderclouds. It is enough that we can know that Helius is there, and can see the fiery disc and feel the heat. Eos, Goddess of Dawn, gets us farmers out of bed, and we shut our eyes on the pale light of Selene, the Moon. Those gods and goddesses we respect. How else would we divide our seasons and our days?

'But as for the Deathless Ones, the mighty gods of Olympus, country folk don't have much to do with them. We honour them, of course, because it's foolish to risk the anger of immortals. But we remember that everything on earth, including the gods, rests on the bosom of Ge, our universal Mother. Even in the sea there were divine beings before Poseidon, the Earth-Shaker. The old god Pontus ruled the waters at first, as all fishermen know. And he had many strange children whose lives, like our own, grew out of struggle. Some were born to help and some to fear.

'Any sailor can tell you about the terror of the sea. But was the earth any less frightening? Giants and Titans acted like madmen. They even attacked the gods. The ground rumbled and split, islands were tossed around like empty plates, inoffensive little river gods dried up or were torn from their beds. Some of those monsters were so dangerous they had to have mountains heaped on top of them to keep them quiet. But still they rebelled, fuming and roaring under ground, spewing their anger sky-high in volcanic outbursts. All this I have learnt as I campaigned from one end of Greece to the other.

'So, poet, though we don't know much about the proper history of those Holy Ones on Olympus, I'll tell you how it is with my fellow farmers and country folk. There are spirits of earth and sky and sea, and they lay shadows over our lives. The generations of these beings, like us, tear at each other, for place and favour. We, like them, struggle for light. This begins the day you are born and continues until Charon, the grim ferryman, grabs the obol coin from beneath the tongue of your corpse and begins to cross the black waters to the Underworld.'

The old soldier stopped as the steward and the household slaves bustled forward with the first dishes from the kitchen. Wine was drawn into earthenware pitchers and the wine-cups set out. The fire,

stoked by the master's energetic hand, was roaring away with too much enthusiasm and had to be damped to a more comfortable heat. The smell of roast meat drew the men to the table.

'Helius has hurried home with the sun,' Mantes began again, settling into his place with the sigh of the traveller finally at rest, 'and even old warriors may take their ease. After the alarms of the day, neither Hector nor Achilles was ashamed to strip off the sweaty armour and stretch out on the banks of the Scamander. A song or a tale beguiled them while the river ran by. But I see I mustn't beat about the bush with military men. Your life has been struggle. Your reward – as with all mankind – will be the grave. How can it be otherwise, for we follow the path that the gods have trodden before us? Listen, and I'll tell you of fear in heaven and pain on earth.

'At the beginning of things, Ge, our Mother Earth, was lonely in the coldness of the void. So she called to Uranus, the Heavenly Sky, and he covered her and they mated in joy and expectation. Many children were born – the nights of eternity are long. First, the Titans came from the womb of Earth: Oceanus, whose waters encircle the world, and Hyperion, father of Helius and the first to guide the chariot of the sun, and Iapetus, father of Prometheus, that friend to mankind. Then Ge gave birth to a race of goddesses, mysterious, maternal, perhaps beyond knowing, for only with one of them – Mnemosyne – did memory begin. Chief among these immortals were Rhea and Tethys. Then Cronus crept from the Earth's womb, bawling and angry, a powerful deity to pity and fear.

'After the birth of Cronus, it seemed as if Mother Earth began to experiment with the bounds of nature. A floodgate opened and she poured forth monstrous beings. First, the Hundred-Handed Giants emerged, three monsters larger than mountains and each with fifty heads. Then came the Cyclopes, with a round eye in the middle of the forehead – oafish brutes, almost as large as the giants, who later forged lightning and divine thunderbolts for Zeus in their underground smithies. These were the beings of Earth, creatures of riot and destruction, and their father, Uranus, lord of the steel-blue skies who moved serenely among the orderly procession of the stars, hated them all. What had he to do with such ugly, brutal, ungovernable beings? So he took hold of his children one by one and banished them from the light of Heaven, thrusting them deep into the dark body of their mother Earth.

'But Ge groaned and ached to be delivered of her burden. "Dear Mother," her children cried within her, "it's dark and musty down here. Beneath us, Tartarus sends up the stink of Death, and yet we have not lived. Release us into the light and air." And Ge schemed against the injustice done to her and her children by Uranus. In secret

she made a flint sickle and gave it an edge keen enough to split one of her hairs. Then she called her children. "Sons," she said, "who is willing to put right this evil done to us all by your father, Uranus? Be bold, and I will show you the way." But all were afraid of their father's heavenly anger. "Well," cried Ge in derision, "such vast and strong and big hearted children – and so timid!" Then Cronus, the sly one, spoke up. "Mother, I'll do it, whatever it is. Our father, the Heavenly Sky, keeps us from our birthright. He deserves neither respect nor pity."

'Ge gave Cronus the sickle and hid him in ambush. That night, when Uranus, as eager as a stallion, came to cover Earth, Cronus reached out his left hand – that sinister, that unlucky hand! – took his father by the genitals and cut them off with a sweep of the sickle. As he flung the castrated parts towards the sea, drops of blood and semen fell on Mother Earth and fertilized her womb once more. And now, what strange things emerged! Who can fathom the productivity of Earth? She brought forth more giants, and the nymphs of the ash tree, and the three Erinyes, those avenging Furies whom all fear and none can escape. And where the severed member of the god fell, by Cape Drepanum, the sea frothed until the goddess Aphrodite rose from the foam. This is the immortal, the child of lust and violence, the most beautiful, dangerous one, whom men also call Philommedes, the Cock Lover. Aphrodite went to Cyprus, where she was joined by Eros and Desire, and ever since these three mischief-makers have plotted to set the hearts of mankind on fire.

'Once Uranus was castrated he fell away from Ge. No longer did they embrace in the night. Heaven and Earth were now divided and stood apart. The one was the realm of frozen space, and the other the ground for all our pleasure and all our pain.'

They had finished eating. After the earlier tumult of the wind and the rain, the day was dying more peacefully. A smell of damp earth suffused the hall, vying with the lingering aromas of sesame and thyme and rosemary. Stomachs were satisfied. They had eaten barley soup, and a kid roasted with chestnuts, and last year's olives in brine, and handfuls of raisins. There was bread to take the edge off the wine, which was new and a little raw.

The olive logs of the fire were glowing cheerfully and Mantes wrapped himself luxuriously in the woollen cloak laid out for him by the steward. But his host still wore the leather jerkin and the short linen tunic of the old army man. His arms and legs, tanned and time-blotched, and taut with strong sinews, were bare. He had eaten sparingly, and the steward had refilled his wine-cup only once.

Something about the tale he had just heard preoccupied him. Leaning back on an elbow, he fixed the poet with a startling, clear eye.

‘What you tell me,’ he said, ‘about the beginning of things is largely news to me. We soldiers have studied fortifications and warfare but we have neglected theology. I listen to you and wonder. The actions of the Immortals are very puzzling. What are blunt fellows such as I to make of it all? As a former commander who has seen many battles, I think it may be better to clear our heads of divine mysteries and stick to learning the heroic virtues. How else can we keep our lands safe from invaders and lawless rogues?’

‘Before we ate,’ Mantes replied, ‘you did not neglect the usual libations and prayers.’

‘Respect is easy. It requires neither sweat nor blood. We do what is customary. It is best to sacrifice as our fathers sacrificed.’

‘But what do you ask for when you pray to the Deathless Gods?’

‘My trade was war, but to the wise man war is only a road to security. Now that I’m a farmer, I ask for peace and good harvests.’

‘But for yourself?’

‘Health, and to keep the strength of my arm.’

‘Strength to do what?’

‘To keep family and household safe, and to advance us all in prosperity and happiness.’

‘A noble answer, indeed. A soldier’s answer. But how does happiness look to you?’

‘Alive, to judge the present moment correctly and to march with the demands of the time. To die a death worthy of a soldier. And after death, I see nothing but darkness.’

He frowned. He rubbed his beak of a nose and pushed his couch back a little, as if to put some distance between him and his questioner. A soldier does not like to be confronted by matters of the soul. They upset the simple scheme of war and peace, of survival or death. Is that what poets are for, he wondered, to sow tares and weeds among old certainties?

He rapped sharply on the table, summoning the steward and waving towards the empty wine-cups. A soldier lived in the company of Ares, the war-god, a loudmouth, a slaughterer, whose cruel ways did not encourage any further enquiry into the nature of the gods. No, his life until his retirement to his estate had been that of the campaigner. He had slogged all the roads where Greek fought fellow Greek or invader, from Rhodope in the barbarian north, where the mountains were like broken teeth, to the five gaunt fingers of Taygetus, rising high above the arid plains of the south. In the east, he had seen the ruined and wind-swept gates of Troy. He had tracked across sea-lanes strewn with wrecks and drowned bodies to the bird-spattered cliffs of Corcyra and

the little gouged inlets of Ithaca, no bigger than dog-hutches. Reflecting on this long experience, he turned towards his guest.

‘The lesson of war, poet, is fear. A soldier clings to fact, not mystery, otherwise he could not endure. Do not worry about the gods. Salute them and let them be, for there’s nothing we can do about them. The Fates, or the Furies, have us marked and we’ll not escape them. But teach me to live nobly and to do great deeds and you shall eat at my table food fit for the feasts of Olympus every day of your life until Hades greets your shade in the Underworld.’

Mantes poured a little water into his wine. He wanted to get his words straight. He gazed into the fire and hugged the cloak to him, as if he felt the chill of uncertainty. How was he to bring home to this old warrior that conflict was a rank plant that grew out of the nature, the very stuff, of humanity, a poisonous weed sown by the gods themselves? As soon as Cronus had usurped the place of Uranus, his castrated father, at once ambition, hatred, fear and cruelty were afoot in the universe. Then Cronus reigned, but for how long? He took his sister Rhea as his wife, and his other brothers and sisters joined together, each to each. But in these families there was neither comfort nor safety. Cronus was afraid.

Mantes put it to the old soldier as he would to a child.

‘How did it come about, even among the gods, that those who had risen might also fall? What had been done once could be done again. The door of knowledge, once opened, can never be closed completely. So even Cronus, most powerful of the gods, had reason to be afraid. His parents, Heaven and Earth, from whom all things sprang, foresaw his fate and warned him to beware his destiny. But where would the danger come from? In his panic he suspected everyone. The grim Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handed Giants? They were fearsome enough to do anything. Cronus acted as his father had done and imprisoned them in the bowels of the earth. Or maybe his children? Each one was likely to be his enemy! So Cronus sat by the birth-stool of Rhea, and as each child came from the womb he snatched the baby and devoured it. The goddesses Hestia, Demeter and Hera, the gods Poseidon and Hades— one by one Cronus devoured them.

‘Now, imagine the grief of the mother. “Heaven and Earth, dear parents, save me and mine,” Rhea called out. They heard her and took pity. When Rhea was big with Zeus, her youngest child, Mother Ge came in darkness and spirited her daughter away to Lyctus, in Crete, where, in a wild and secret place, the babe was safely born and hidden in a cave on Mount Aegaeon. Then Ge took a smooth stone, about the size of a baby, wrapped it in swaddling clothes and gave it to Cronus, who swallowed it down in one lump. Then he was satisfied.’

‘Strange satisfaction,’ the old soldier snorted.

‘Yes, and only temporary at that. What is to come cannot be deflected; even the gods can’t do that. Time passed. Though raised in a cave, Zeus knew who he was. Ge and Rhea, the maternal spirits, had brooded over him, guiding each step. And the cunning of Ge – for who, finally, can resist the influence of Mother Earth? – induced her son Cronus to vomit up what he had swallowed. And the first thing he spewed out was the stone he had taken for his youngest son. Zeus honoured this stone, which he set at Pytho, in the vale of Parnassus, so that all mankind might see and remember.’

At this point the host interrupted. ‘That much seems clear,’ he said. ‘Travelling in the place now called Delphi, I saw something like that. There, by the sacred precinct, near the tomb of Neoptolemus, is a stone much rubbed and honoured, though it’s nothing much to look at. Every day the people of Delphi anoint it with oil.’

‘It is the actions of mankind,’ Mantes replied, ‘that make the gods credible. Without worship and sacrifice, who shall know that the gods exist?’

Mantes continued his story. It was easy to see what would happen now. After vomiting up the stone, Cronus spewed up his other children, who could not restrain their enmity against their father. Zeus incited his brothers and sisters against Cronus and they needed few arguments. It was a poor fate for young gods to be imprisoned in the belly of their father! Then Zeus released the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handed Giants from their dungeon below the earth and in gratitude they rallied to his cause. Preparations began for war. The Cyclopes went to work, beating metal on the anvil, forging for Zeus the lightning and thunderbolts of his wrath. For Poseidon, they made a huge trident, a three-pronged fork with wicked points. And for Hades, later Lord of the Underworld, they fashioned a cap of invisibility. In alarm, Cronus called to his aid the Titans, the first children whom Ge had borne to Uranus. Under their leader, Atlas, strongest of them all, they made ready to defend the rule of Cronus. The gods were at war.

Mantes rose from his couch to stretch his legs. He took a turn or two in front of the fire, pausing to shake the smouldering logs into a sudden flame. Then he went on quietly.

‘You know very well what war is. I don’t need to remind a soldier what happens when the arm strikes and the blood flows. Yet how much more terrible it is when the gods fall out. What superhuman acts of courage, strength and violence. The madness of battle. The vainglory and boasting. The world of nature torn to shreds. Godlike rage and godlike suffering. For ten years Cronus and the Titans held fast on Mount Othrys. For ten years the army of Zeus could not be

shifted from the peaks of Olympus.'

'Stalemate,' the host muttered in sympathy. 'That's how it usually is when equal forces are entrenched in mountain strongholds. Time to try cunning, or treachery, or find new allies.'

'Well said, old warrior, you remember your trade. That's just what Zeus thought. He called for renewed help from the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handed Giants. The giants, Cottus, Briareus and Gyes, with three hundred hands between them, each as large as a temple courtyard, made the sky black with a hail of boulders. And into this gloom Zeus flashed the lurid shafts of his thunder and lightning, prepared for him by the Cyclopes. Seas boiled. The ground heaved. The sun was draped in dust and rubble. Even the far depths of Tartarus shivered, fearing the collapse of the world above.

'But the bonds of the world held and mighty Zeus, the Thunderer, prevailed. The Titans were overwhelmed. The triumphant gods of Olympus tied them in chains and hurled them below, sinking as far as an anvil would fall in nine days and nights, down to the realm of Tartarus. There, in black mist and bog, they were locked behind triple ramparts of bronze. Poseidon closed the ramparts with a gate of bronze and set the Hundred-Handed Giants, each with fifty heads, eternally on guard. Only Atlas, mightiest of the Titans, was spared this prison. Zeus banished him to the end of the world, to stand upon the last shore by the circling waters of Oceanus, to bear the weight of the sky on his bowed shoulders.'

There was a silence. Then the host banged the table in approval and called for wine.

'A good campaign,' he said with a laugh. 'The enemy beaten, rounded up and well guarded. The leading rogue set apart and made to feel his shame. But tell me: did All-Seeing Zeus now taste the sweet fruits of victory?'

'Not yet. One last opponent arose out of the infinite resources of Earth. Perhaps Ge was offended by the imprisonment of the Titans, her first-born children. In any case she coupled with Tartarus, the infernal deity of the dark wastes, and gave birth to Typhon, her last and most terrible child. Imagine a being whose head touched the stars. His arms reached from sunrise to sunset. From the waist upward he looked like a man. But what a man! A face huge and voracious. A brow burning like forest fires. Hair and beard like a storm in motion. A hundred snakes lashed around his winged shoulders, each one mouthing weird cries – hissing, squealing, roaring, bellowing, the gasps of the tortured, the laments of the damned. And below his waist, instead of legs, two giant serpents slithered and twinned.

'This was the monster who challenged the victory of Zeus. They began to fight, and once more the world held its breath. Even the

Titans groaned in their subterranean prison. Typhon was forced back by lightning and thunderbolts but at Mount Casius, in Syria, he caught Zeus at close quarters. As they grappled Zeus lost his sickle-sword to the monster. With a few rough blows Typhon hacked the sinews from the hands and feet of the god. Then Typhon carried the stricken Zeus to the Cave of the Winds, in Cilicia, and hid the sinews in a bearskin. Delphyne, half hag and half dragon, guarded the mouth of the cave. But the allies of Zeus, aghast at the defeat of their leader, hurried to help him. Pan, who knew best the lie of the country, crept up on Delphyne and roared in her ear, stunning and confusing her. Then Hermes – the slippery one, the god of the light-fingered – stole back the sinews and skilfully sewed them in place.

‘Furiously, Zeus mounted a chariot with winged horses, driving Typhon north with tempest and fire, so that he fled towards the lands beyond all knowledge. Prodigious leaps took the monster from mountain top to mountain top, pursued by the vengeful god. Wounded and weak, Typhon made a last stand in Thrace. Tearing a mountain from its roots, he hurled it at Zeus. But the arm was weak and the aim was poor. The mountain dropped harmlessly, stained by the monster’s blood. Mount Haemus, it is called – Blood Mountain. Then the game was up for Typhon, for the Fates had called his doom. He dragged his wretched body to Sicily, where Zeus overpowered him and crushed him under Mount Aetna. To this day, a spew of fire and brimstone still bursts out of the mountain from the monster trapped beneath.’

Lempty. The wick in the lamp was flickering and needed trimming. In the hall, the fire had subsided to dying embers. The wine jar was tomorrow would be time enough. Outside, beyond the ring of the fence, a late animal called, hunting or hunted. The old soldier yawned and ruffled his white hair, as stiff as snow-strewn stubble. He began to rise, then he paused, listening into the night.

‘Fear came into the world,’ he said slowly, ‘followed by blood. Every soldier finds, in the end, that his path leads to Blood Mountain. And not only soldiers. The gods have imposed upon all mankind a grim pilgrimage up those painful slopes. The good soldier knows that he fights not only the violence of the enemy but also the violence within. Blood is inevitable. It is our duty to temper it with honour.’

‘Once more, nobly spoken, old warrior. But do not be too confident of success. We are confused by the evidence of our nature, even though it is revealed to us by the action of the gods. Can we ever conquer Blood Mountain?’

The two elderly men were standing now, ready to bring the day to a close. Two seasoned campaigners, in their different ways, they slowly

trod the bars of moonlight that lay across the darkened hall. The experience of their lives had resolved nothing.

‘I’ll leave you with a fable,’ Mantes said, turning towards his bedchamber. ‘A hawk was carrying a speckled nightingale high in the clouds. Pierced by the talons, the little songbird cried out piteously. But the hawk silenced her with disdain: “Miserable fool, why do you weep? One far stronger than you now grips you fast. Sing your heart out but I’ll do to you what I please. Perhaps I’ll eat you, perhaps I’ll let you go. My strength, my appetite, my mastery of the air have given me licence to do as I wish. It is your lot to submit and suffer. Be quiet, or I’ll kill you now.” Reflect on that in the hours of the night.’



Start of a Horse Race from Atlas to Olympia

WALKING THE COUNTRY OF THE GODS

Men and women quarrel, even over the gods. Where do the immortals come from? What lands and which peoples have been blessed by their presence? Mankind acknowledged the greatness of Zeus. After the defeat of Cronus and the Titans, he was unchallenged among the gods, the Lord of the Bright Sky. But on earth, squabbling men, as always ardent for glory, jostled to claim for themselves the holy places of his birth and childhood. The stories told by the poets said one thing, and then another. This place had a claim, and also that one. But the loudest claim came from Crete. Who was right? Since the poets were the historians of the gods, it seemed to Mantes that they, most of all, had a duty to find out. As a Greek and as a poet, Mantes could hardly help himself. He had it in his bones to look into the heart of things: that was the Greek way.

Years ago, when Mantes began to follow his calling, it needed a strong spirit of enquiry, and some courage also, to persuade him to risk the dangers of the voyage to Crete. Poseidon's kingdom, which the sea-god stirred with malicious strokes of his trident from his palace below the waves at Aegae, was often a frightening place, a wind-torn chaos of sea-sickness and terror. Like any landlocked youth, Mantes feared the sea. Besides, Crete was a backwater. King Minos was long dead. His empire was gone, his palace was crumbling into the parched ground. Kites nested in the ruined towers, vermin scuttered in old banqueting halls, now ripped open to the sky. Who, in this wreck of an island, could now afford to support and encourage a storyteller? Men who might once have been princes were now sheep herders and cattle thieves. Their hospitality, always suspicious of strangers, was likely to include a knife in the ribs.

But Crete had its place in the history of the world. If it was the land where gods and mortals played out the divine scheme in the childhood of time, then Mantes had to set aside the fears of a landlubber. Anxiously, he took a trading vessel from Gytheum. He quit

the little mainland port, safely backed by the bulwarks of the Taygetus range, and entrusted his life to some scarred and battered planks, heading for the Gulf of Didymi on the north coast of Crete.

To the outsider, there was something shocking about the island. The sun thrust down like a lance, throwing sharp-edged shadows which scythed the ground and seemed to leave behind little but dust. Under the powerful light, the areas of shade looked dangerously obscure, yet beyond their dark borders there was too much clarity. The light overwhelmed, dazzling the head with heat and nausea. Things nearby – trees, rocks, flaking walls, a lone goat moving like a sleepwalker – were sharply chiselled. But distant objects trembled in the heat-haze and the landscape bled out into indistinctness. To focus at that distance made the eyes hurt.

The plain behind the shoreline was large, empty, frightening. In the solitude the hum of the insects was not friendly but too loud and angry. The mountains, with their promise of a greener, cooler world, looked too remote to be of any help. Their pale tops shimmered into the washed-out sky.

‘Somewhere over there,’ Mantes repeated to himself, to give himself confidence, ‘is the birthplace of Zeus.’

There was no road across the plain, only faint animal tracks, which had scuffed through the thin grass to an underlay of dust and grit. A few grazing beasts fidgeted under the attack of the flies. There was no one to show the way. Mantes walked until he saw some smoke lingering under a small grove of pines. Three bearded peasants, as shaggy as the beasts on the plain, had just finished grilling pieces of lamb, and the damped fire was sending coils of greasy smoke into the low branches of the pines. The men hardly glanced at the traveller. They were busy, gobbling the meat, hacking it from the bone with short daggers. Juices seeped into matted beards. Stinking powerfully of dung and sweat, the peasants seemed as much satyr as human, rough beings coated in hair who might drop onto all-fours at any moment and gallop away.

Mantes leant against a pine, wiping sweat from his face. He waited, judging it not quite safe to interrupt their eating. In a while, the smallest peasant, whose face was made particularly villainous by a gummy diseased eye, belched, cleaned his knife in the ground, and grinned at Mantes.

‘Hot, eh?’ he said cheerfully. ‘The god forgets to rain.’

‘Which god is that?’ Mantes asked, wishing to be polite.

‘Zeus, of course, chief of them all.’

Another peasant laughed. ‘The Cloud-Gatherer, some people call him. Not round here, he isn’t.’

‘Zeus,’ Mantes repeated. ‘I was going to ask you about him.’

‘Ask away. If we know, we’ll tell you. Yes or no, that’s how we deal with questions here.’

‘They say this is his land.’

‘Yes, that’s true. We call it the god-trodden land.’

‘Born somewhere over there,’ the third peasant put in helpfully, waving his knife in the direction of the mountains.

‘So I’ve heard,’ Mantes said. ‘But where exactly would that be?’

The answer was vague. None of the three knew anything definite. The Cave of Dicte was said to be the god’s birthplace, on the slopes of Mount Aegaeon, somewhere to the west. Or was he born, as other Cretans said, on Mount Ida? But that miraculous event was untold years ago, before even the fathers of our fathers were in the land. People came and went, and the land devoured them. What remained was grey stone, white dust, a sun like a branding iron, silence. Many dynasties succeeded each other, passing from pomp to disaster. But the god persists. All-Seeing Zeus governs the land, and the land rules all those who live in it. No child of man escapes the rod of Father Zeus.

‘No use making a fuss,’ the one with the ravaged eye explained. ‘A god is a god. Zeus belongs here but we’re not what you might call friends. What can we know about him? No more than a sailor on a bad sea can guess about Poseidon, making trouble beneath the waves. If we could see what the gods were up to, we could make our own lives easier. Many people have come here in years gone by – pirates, invaders, merchants, settlers, all kinds of adventurers. Zeus has taken them all in hand and made them Greeks. For this is his territory, such as it is, and no one here can avoid his influence. What more can we say?’

Zeus is *Anax*, the King, and he is also *Hellaios*, great father of all Greeks. But at that moment the starry axe of his thunder was not splitting any rain-clouds, yet peasants still had to scratch a living from the sun-baked plains. Having finished their meal, the three men kicked earth over the dying fire, stuck their knives in their belts, and trudged out from the shade of the pines. Talk of the gods was pointless. There was work to be done.

Mantes continued west, by enquiry narrowing his search towards a high ridge in the broken mountains. He climbed into upland pastures thinly dotted with a summer population of sheep and lonely shepherds. Occasionally he passed a shepherd’s temporary camp. Branches were propped in the angle of a rock and covered with skins or cloth. A large, evil dog barked its head off at the approach of a stranger. The rarified air of the hills began to make the lungs of the traveller pant. Above the pasture the way became steep, zig-zagging through fig trees and vallonea and holly-oak and stunted olives. Wild

lupins and thyme grew underfoot. In the evening, when the light changed, crags of limestone put on a sudden golden blush, and the bright scars left by landslip or winter storm were as vivid as flame. They looked like tailings and embers pitched out from the underground forges of the Cyclopes. From the heights, the traveller saw valleys slowly filling with blue shadow, and the wide bowl of the Lassiti plains beyond turned a burnished copper in the sun's declining rays.

As night fell, Mantes forgot the sense of wonder and the exhilaration of the view. Afraid of darkness and wild animals, he jammed himself into the small space between a jumble of rocks and a twisted oak. Curled among the roots of the oak – the tree sacred to Zeus – he pulled his cloak over his head and prayed to the Father of the Gods and to Eos, Goddess of the Dawn, to see him safe through the black hours. When daylight returned he was refreshed and ready to approach the birthplace of Zeus in the Cave of Dicte.

'Stop! Wait!' These plaintive commands came from a small, spry figure puffing up the hillside. When he had climbed level with the cave, he collapsed on a rock, fanning himself and getting his breath back. Then he turned a stern eye on the poet.

'You can't go in there, just like that. Definitely not. There's a proper way to do things.'

'Who says I can't?' Mantes asked. 'Who are you?'

'I keep an eye on things round here.'

'Are you a priest of this holy place?'

'Not exactly.' The little fellow began to look shifty. 'We don't run to a priest up here in the wilderness. I'm more of a caretaker. I take time off from my flocks, guarding the place and making sure things are done right. Respect and honour, you know.'

He gazed into the distance with an innocent air, though he had manoeuvred himself to block the path to the cave. But a small gift of coins, discreetly slipped into his hand, changed his humour immediately. At once he was all business.

'Let's get on with it,' he said briskly. 'I've got to get back to my flock.'

He unfastened from his belt a flask of water and some dried figs tied up in a cloth. Then he poured the water in purification over Mantes' hands and over his own. He laid the figs, as an offering, on a slab of rock that made a natural altar. Then both men prayed, standing with their arms spread wide and their palms upwards. They prayed towards the huge, empty sky in which Helios' chariot was just beginning to drag the heat of the new day up from the eastern rim.

Then the guardian was ready. Solemnly he thrust out his little chest and began to point out the catalogue of holy wonders.

‘Those faint dents in the ground were left by the divine hands of Rhea, when she supported herself giving birth to Zeus. The Dactyls, the Finger-folk, sprang from those same marks. They are the brawny smiths who taught us Cretans the use of iron and copper. Those rogues who live around Mount Ida say that all this happened on their mountain, but we know better. And that tree, that poor old oak now gnarled and dying, that’s where the golden cradle of baby Zeus was hung. He lay there and his angry father, Cronus, could not find him because he was neither in heaven nor on earth nor in the sea. The golden watch-dog snarled below, pawing the earth just there, scratching up that pile of rubble.

‘Come this way now. Here, in the open space before the cave, the youthful Curetes danced and banged their weapons, making a hideous racket that drowned out the squalls of our lusty young god. This is the path where Amaltheia, the goat-nymph, went to and fro with her milk and with honey from our own sweet hillside. She was the divine nurse, and the god rewarded her service. All-Providing Zeus made the Cornucopia out of one of her horns, filling it with a never-ending supply of food and drink. Later, Zeus gave her further honour. When he needed an invincible cloak, he took a goatskin in memory of Amaltheia and made it into his sacred aegis. Such was the respect and affection between the divine babe and his nurse! It teaches us lessons. Look up even today into the night sky and you’ll still find Amaltheia, placed by Zeus in the constellation of the Goat.’

By now they had come to the mouth of the cave. They entered with awe. In front of them was a large, dank, cold, slippery, downward-sloping darkness. Some light entered through the low, wide mouth but withered quickly, glancing very faintly off pale, dripping stalactites and then dying, rubbed out by the emptiness. The air was chill and wet. A loose stone clattered down, the cave sounding ever more hollow until the stone was sucked into the deep stillness of an underground pool far below. They stumbled forward for a while, then could see no more. Beyond was mystery, and the heavy oppression of the unknown. Human sight could penetrate only so far into the nursery of Zeus. Overcome by something like fear, they turned back.

Out on the sun-drenched hillside, at once the world looked safer and easier to understand. The Zeus of the cave was a primal god, an infant deity just emerged from the universal womb of Earth, from whom all things descended. He was not yet Lord of the Bright Sky, not until he had defeated his father, Cronus, and the Titans. Only when he had routed them from Mount Othrys did he come into his inheritance, as had been foretold.

Mantes saw that even the gods had a destiny, which they could not avoid. The three Fates, daughters of Darkness and Night, governed the

course of all lives, both mortal and immortal. Clotho, the eldest sister, spins the thin thread of destiny. Lachesis, the second, measures the length. Atropos, small and terrible, cuts with her shears each allotted portion. They are beyond appeal, though radiant Apollo once tricked them with drink and extended for a while the life of his friend Admetus. Bad luck to those who try to escape their decision, for it is a delusion to think one may tangle with the Fates. Typhon thought he could unseat Zeus and rule in his place. But when that monster was locked in battle against the King of the Gods, and already growing weak, the Fates cunningly persuaded him to eat human food to regain his strength. But this weakened him still further, for our food is not fit for an immortal, and Zeus struck him down.

With relief, Mantes turned away from the mountains and the Cave of Dicte and set out for the coast. Cretan Zeus, the young god of a bare, denuded land, raked by the sun and worn away by waves of invaders, seemed an unformed deity, like rough clay waiting to be given the shape of a mature god. Crete was the nursery, the initiation of the god into a suffering world. His destiny pointed him elsewhere, towards his allotted place as Lord of Olympus and master of the world.

In mankind, they reveal so little. The history of their lives is like a comet glimpsed through clouds, seen and then gone, passing into realms no human eye can reach. The poets, who tell the story to each generation, must laboriously piece together evidence from the brief view through the clouds.

In the years that followed, Mantes grew experienced in his trade. Before a thigh-wound and age took the spring out of his step, he served the Muses well, taking his songs and tales up and down the land, to all who would listen. Gradually, in many wanderings, he saw how the influence of Zeus radiated over the whole country where men and women had become Greek. In many strange places – in a hill shrine still hung with withered garlands, in a grove of oaks, in a rich temple sanctuary, by the altar of an army – suddenly he would sense the overwhelming presence of the King of Gods. It seemed to Mantes that Zeus was educating his servant. ‘Look for me in Dodona,’ he was saying. ‘Search me out in the meadows of Olympia.’

So Mantes went. He travelled to Thesprotia, far to the northwest. This was not fertile country for poets. Few people lived there. The inhabitants were surly and uncommunicative, their language being only a tortured kind of Greek. They had no knowledge of writing. But the Fates led him on. The road was hard among swelling, barren hills.

Moisture-laden winds flew off the western seas, settling a melancholy fog in the valleys, or dumping cold rains on the bare peaks. In winter, the mountain lakes froze. In spring, fast-melting waters swept tracks away and carved ever more deeply into ravines where plane trees began to spread leaves as tough as leather. In the warm places, sheltered from the wind, wild ilex grew above bushes of white-flowering myrtle. Neither merchants nor armies came this way. Few sounds broke into the stillness, only wind sighs and the chuckle of tumbling streams and the chink-chink of the stonechat.

‘Where are you going?’ the lonely bystanders asked, as the traveller went past.

‘To Dodona, to the holy precinct where Zeus of the oak tree lives.’

The bystanders gave a smug smile. ‘Of course. Why else would anyone come to us? We wish you luck at the oracle of Zeus. Let the god speak to your satisfaction.’

They took pride in the only distinction their land had to offer. All in heartache or doubt turned their prayers towards Zeus at Dodona. When Achilles was in trouble at Troy, lying low and sulking between his burning ships and the walls of the city, he petitioned Zeus of snow-bound Dodona to grant his pretty young friend Patroclus some of his own strength and luck. Shipwrecked Odysseus, blown from his homeward course and cast up on a beach in Thesprotia, climbed wearily to Dodona to ask Zeus the way back to Ithaca. It was well known that Zeus had hidden himself at Dodona. He would speak through his oracle to those who came with humility and gifts.

Mantes was only another in the long chain of enquirers. ‘Take this path,’ the bystanders said. ‘The sanctuary lies at the end of the valley. There’s nothing much to see – a big oak on a patch of stony ground, surrounded by a low wall. Round about are the tripods and cauldrons that the priests use for their prophecies. Approach with reverence. This is sacred ground, which belongs to Zeus and his consort Dione – we call his divine wife by this name, though others call her Hera. Look for the holy priestess of the oracle and her fellow priests. They’re easy to find, with their feet unwashed as they have always been, and still sleeping on the bare ground under the oak. If you need them, don’t give them coins. They have no use for money. Bring them cattle, oil or wine instead. Ask your question. Zeus will speak through the mouth of the oracle.’

It was a lonely and impressive place. A giant sky peered over the rim of the surrounding hills. Boisterous weather scoured the valley, shaking the limbs of the sacred oak. Wind moaned in the bronze cauldrons of the priests, imitating in chords and whispers the voice of the god. But what did it mean?

‘Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus will be,’ the oldest priestess chanted. ‘O

Great Zeus.'

She shook the grimy locks of her hair. Her eyes speared the questioner through and through.

'Our ancestors,' she told Mantes, 'the people called Pelasgians, prayed at this spot to nameless gods. Then a black dove flew from Thebes in Egypt and settled in this oak. The dove spoke in a human voice and taught us the name of Zeus, the god who dwelt in the roots of this tree. The dove became his oracle. We who are the priestesses are the descendants of that holy dove, and ever since we have served as the mouth of Zeus. In an ecstasy, we voice the divine judgment. But we do not know what the words mean. We wake from a trance and cannot remember what has been said.'

At Dodona, earth-born Zeus, the god of the beginning of the world, was slowly leading his people out of their uncertainty. He was the guide to mankind, the instructor of ways and means, the comfort of the perplexed. When to sow and when to reap? Who to marry? When to make war, and when to sue for peace? Mantes saw that he would not find resplendent Zeus, the Lord of the Bright Sky, among the simple folk of Thesprotia. Their Zeus was still a god of earth, a god among the roots. Mantes knew that he must move on to places where mankind had reached a better prosperity and a fuller understanding. Immortals do not give up their secrets easily. Why reveal mysteries to empty minds?

It was time to abandon the poor and stormy northwest. Mantes went south to Arcadia, where a poet could feed well and be entertained and sleep softly without fear of catastrophe or violence. From a ring of high, protective hills the land fell away westwards towards the plains and the sea. Many streams coursed down the crumbling limestone slopes, plunging through dark-wooded valleys but growing broad and lazy on the plain, watering grain-fields and meadows and vineyards. The harsh summer of the Peloponnese was tempered by moist air off the western sea. The country was not tame or easily worked. It needed the care of a vigorous people, but when good soil and good water were put to use, the land became green and productive. Farmers had prospered here for as long as history could recall. Wealth and good harvests had often attracted invaders but the appeal of the country had taken the sting out of military ambition. Soldiers found better things to do. They stayed, built houses, left their weapons to rust in a forgotten chest and stealthily became farmers again. At Olympia, in the flood plain between the reed-fringed rivers Alpheius and Cladeius, they gathered under arbutus and tall cypresses, to trade and talk. They took stock of the world and were at peace. And in return for their good luck they did not forget to honour the gods, in the sanctuary called the Altis at the foot of Kronion Hill.

Long ago the gods had found out this pleasant spot. What appeals to mankind, pleases the gods also. Before even Zeus was born, his parents, Cronus and Rhea, had come to Kronion. The people of Olympia say that when Rhea's time arrived she went in the night to the place where no shadows form, in the mountains of Arcadia, and secretly gave birth to Zeus. She washed the babe in the river and then delivered him to Mother Earth who carried him away to Crete, where he would be safe from the jealousy of Cronus.

Later, Zeus remembered the place so favoured by his parents. When the Titans were defeated, and the long, bitter campaign was over, he recalled the sheltered and abundant land cooled by the western breeze. To the north, a savage wind buffeted the mountains, and parched air dried up the land to the south. But on Kronion the fragrance of asphodel and pine scented the mild evening. Olympia seemed a blessed, if temporary, relief after ten years of warfare on like-named Mount Olympus, the austere citadel of the gods. Zeus journeyed south. Even an immortal may relax.

Feasts, entertainments, conversation, friendship, the company of congenial spirits – that was the rule instituted by Zeus in the lucky country that stretched away from the foot of Kronion Hill. With the Titans overthrown and imprisoned in dark earth, the barbarism of brutality and raw power was at an end. Triumphant Zeus had brought in the age of civilization. In Olympia, at the foot of the hill, mankind followed the lead given by the gods on the heights. Strangers came and settled, safe under the protection of Zeus, God of Guests. To Zeus, God of the Household, each family made an offering. A town grew while Zeus, Lord of the City, looked on. In the streets packhorses clattered, hens flew under the feet, pots banged, merchants and housewives and slaves haggled over the price of lentils or barley. Zeus of the Market Place was fostering trade and commerce. Home, the house well swept, a table laden with fruits of the fecund earth, wine-cups full of the new vintage – these were the gifts of peace and civilization offered by kindly Zeus. But occasionally, when the thunder rolled, echoing between the slopes of the valley, and the downpour threw torrents into the shallow river-beds, Zeus reminded all his subjects that his defeat of Cronus had left him the God of the Sky. He was rightly called the Thunderer, the stern ruler of both nature and human lives.

Peace called for celebration. The first Heracles, one of the large-muscled Dactyls who had sprung from the fingerprints of Rhea, was summoned from Crete to found a games in honour of Father Zeus. Below the hill, the gods of Olympus sported, glorying in their vitality and good spirits, and in their victory over the Titans. Zeus himself presided. Was it not on Kronion that he had wrestled with Cronus

hand to hand, and defeated him? Now the other gods ran and wrestled and boxed. Apollo, God of Light and Grace, won the footrace from the swift but devious Hermes. He then met Ares, the God of Battles, in the boxing ring and sent the rough bully home with his ears ringing. That was the final victory of mind and art over the dark forces of violence.

Respectfully, the people of Olympia continued what Zeus and his divine court had begun. The games were reborn among mankind. The ghostly laughter of divine sport was mirrored in the human cries of the crowd, the victor's shout, the applause as the winner's brow was crowned with a wreath of olive branches. To the name of Dactylic Heracles, founder of the Olympic Games, the people of the land added their own later Heracles, the world-renowned hero, son of Zeus and Alcmene, and grandson of Pelops, father of the whole Peloponnese, of which Arcadia was a part.

In the precinct of the Altis, smoke from burnt offerings rose intermingling to Pelops and Zeus. Nearby, grew the wild olives that Heracles had brought from the headwaters of the Danube, in the savage land of the Hyperboreans. From the young branches of these sacred olives, a youth with a golden sickle cut the wood for the victors' wreaths. Every fourth year the heralds, similarly wreathed, set out from the Altis to the farthest corners of Zeus' dominions. To receive and to accept the invitation to celebrate the games in honour of the Father of the Gods was a privilege for Greeks only. They alone were the people of Zeus.

On the level land between the Alpheius and the Cladeius, Mantes and the priest of the Altis strolled together. Dusk had brought coolness to the dying day. The wide, shallow streams, much reduced by summer heat, broke over many exposed stones, glittering in the sun's last rays. The sport was over. The winner of the footrace had run the 200-metre length of the *stadion*. He had lit the sacrificial fire to Zeus and now stood apart, naked and muscular, in power and bodily proportion rivalling one of the images of the gods. The crowd dispersed. The purple-clad judges went homeward, down the darkening green lanes of the valley. It was time to give thanks to the Deathless Ones.

In the lee of Kronion Hill, the sanctuary was beginning to sparkle with altar fires. There were no buildings, no temples, no shrines – just low altars of stone or clay dotted among the trees of the Altis. Mankind spoke to the gods simply, without grandeur, heart to heart. Votive gifts hung in the branches of the trees. In the holiest place of the sanctuary was the fire-altar of Father Zeus, only a mound of wood-ash, without structure and unadorned. Within reach were the altars of the Twelve Immortals of Olympus, the companions of the divine struggle who had helped Zeus overthrow Cronus and the Titans.

Around and about, some sixty other altars showed that the gratitude of mankind was extended to everything that was holy, to the Nymphs, the Graces, the Muses, and the implacable Fates.

Mantes watched as priests went serenely from altar to altar, touching a torch to the kindling and making fireflies of flame dance in the dusk. He knew that the court of the gods was not here, in Olympia of the barley-fields and vineyards, but far to the north among the jagged peaks of Mount Olympus where cloud and long snowfalls kept the majesty of the gods hidden from human view. The divine presence at Olympia was a happy diversion, a gift to mankind from Zeus, Lord of the Sky. Through this gift the door of knowledge was opened a little, allowing mankind to mirror, through the arts of civilization, the perfect community of the gods.

At peace with himself, refreshed by the breeze and beginning to be lulled by the first stirring of the night insects, Mantes heard with half an ear the invocations of the priest.

‘Happy Zeus, ruler of rulers, most blessed of the blessed, most perfect of the perfect,’ the priest was crooning softly. ‘Zeus is air, Zeus is earth, Zeus is sky.’

Yes, Mantes thought drowsily, after all my travels and toils now at last I understand.

And he gave thanks.



Apollo

THE SUMMIT

The sea, a vast expanse of sky floated over unknown lands. To the west, at a short distance from the shore, the land started to buckle and rise steeply. The gigantic mass of the mountain was so large that the travellers at the foot could see no beginning and no end. It was a wall that blocked out the imagination. Nor could the eye make out the topmost heights. Dense cloud sat on the heavy shoulders of the mountain, but somewhere beyond that blindfold rose forty-two peaks. The boy became dizzy with looking. He knew this was Mount Olympus, the home of the gods. But was there one peak for Zeus, and forty-one lesser peaks for other gods?

The merchant from Delos was not sure. ‘Father Zeus, of course, is there,’ he said respectfully, ‘and his brother Poseidon. But how many others? They say the Olympian gods and goddesses are twelve in number. But who else? The sky is filled with strange deities. Cat-faced and dog-headed fellows from Egypt. Ruffian-gods from Phrygia, Mysia and Caria, who look to us as if they’re up to no good. Odd divinities in Media and beyond, in caftans and fezzes, with hardly enough Greek between them to say “Here’s to your health”. Are they up there, jostling for our affections? And what of the half-forgotten ones, some still honoured here and there? Are those crags echoing with their lonely sighs?’

The party of travellers was going north, on the narrow road cramped between the mountains and the Thracian sea. The Fates, in whose hands their lives rested, drew them that way, but they went with misgiving. Everyone knew the reputation of the northern lands. Thessaly was dangerous. Chalcidice and Thrace were worse. And somewhere beyond were the Hyperboreans, in the realms of the hardly human.

They had left Mount Ossa behind, like the last lighthouse of civilization. In the vale of Tempe many had paused, to gather courage. And here Mantes had also stopped, hesitating for a moment in the cycle of his wanderings. He saw around him those waiting to go on –

merchants, herdsmen, soldiers, wanderers, couriers and servants, a few family groups – and he attached himself to one of these loose bands, seeking safety in numbers. In the dawn, as Eos drew the curtain of the day, they took to the road. Just ahead, Olympus reared up in the path, a place of holiness and dread.

‘A salute to Poseidon, at least,’ said an old sailor, squinting a practised weather eye at the high, grey turmoil of the clouds. ‘When Cronus was defeated, and his three sons drew lots for a share of the world, Zeus took the sky, Hades the Underworld, and Poseidon got the sea. The surface of the earth was common ground, where each had rights, though Zeus, the Thunderer, is mightiest of the three.’

The old sailor was making his way back to his northern island home on Thasos. Damp sea air had crept into his bones. Hobbling with arthritis, he was glad to cadge a ride or a lift in a cart whenever he could. He had had enough of the sea.

‘Everyone who’s seen the sea in a temper knows the nature of Poseidon. The Earth-Shaker, he’s called, for good reason. His mother, Rhea, threw the infant Poseidon into the sea, so that Cronus would not swallow him. And there Poseidon stayed. He had found his element. Capheira, the daughter of Oceanus, was his nurse. The nine Telchines, magicians and cunning craftsmen of the Underworld, were his first companions on the island of Rhodes. Some say that they made him his trident, but in fact the Cyclopes made it, during the War of the Gods.

‘We fear the sea. What lies below the shifting waters? A kingdom of mystery and uncertain power. The divine lottery on Olympus gave all this to Poseidon, and the old watery deities – Pontus, Oceanus, Nereus – made way for him. The little gods of rivers and streams were careful to obey him too, lest he shrivel them with heat and drought, or blast them from their beds with storm and flood. Look at his face, huge and surly in a waving forest of sea-green hair, and recognize his power. As the oceans surround the land, so Poseidon is the Girdler of the Earth, and all mankind trembles before him. He is as swift and sudden as the storm, three strides taking him from Samothrace to his golden palace below the waters at Aegae. His horses have bronze hooves and golden manes, shimmering in movement like the evening sun on an in-running tide. Monsters, grotesque beasts, slimy things frisk in the wake of the god. The furious speed of his chariot parts the sea and its axle remains dry.’

‘We know all about the Earth-Shaker,’ a voice interrupted, ‘but tell me this: why is the sea-god’s chariot drawn by horses, not by dolphins, or perhaps sea-monsters?’

The new speaker was a horse-breeder from the grasslands of Macedonia. Some months before, he had gone south with a string of ponies to sell in the markets of Attica and Corinth. Trade had been

good but towns made him uneasy and he was hurrying back to the unconfined pastures of the River Axios. His large moustache, exuberant and fiercely brushed, spoke of well-being. He wore a thick sheepskin tunic, and the hardy little bay he rode sported a vivid new horse cloth. The horse, used to the free-striding plains, was nervous in the human crowd but riding, to the Macedonian, was as natural as breathing. With a few flicks of his plaited whip he steadied the horse with almost absent-minded skill.

‘To us,’ he continued, ‘Poseidon is Hippios, the Lord of the Horse. Our people say that even before he inherited the oceans he came south with the gift of horses from the limitless plains, where the wild flowers bloom and the grasses ripple like water. We say that when Cronus came to devour Poseidon, Rhea deceived her husband and gave him a young foal instead. Poseidon invented the bridle, not Pallas Athene, as those boastful Athenians claim. Poseidon, the Unharvested, is the god of our plains, and our horses – wild, powerful, noble – share the character of the god. Poseidon is the father of horses. When he felt the sting of lust he coupled with the Gorgon Medusa and she gave birth to Pegasus, the famous winged horse. When Demeter was bothered by the fumbling and the hot breath of the god, as she was searching for her lost daughter, Persephone, she turned herself into a mare. But what was more natural than that he should become a stallion? He mounted her and she brought forth Arion, the horse as swift as the wind.’

‘Your horse-god,’ the old sailor replied, ‘why, that’s just Poseidon finding himself space and room. He’s the sea-god, but all lands are his to play with, jointly with Zeus and Hades. A god obeys his nature. The violence that Poseidon does at sea, or with horses, was repeated in his violence against countries and cities. Even his fellow gods had to look to their honour. He tried to snatch Naxos from Dionysus, Corinth from Helios, and even Aegina from Zeus. Twice he tangled with Athene. Once he laid claim to her city of Troezen. Then he wanted Athens itself. Frustrated by the judgment of Olympus, he ordered his waters to flood the Attic plain. Then he grabbed Argolis and prepared to defend it against stiff and unforgiving Hera, Queen of the Gods. Zeus tried to steer a course between his wife and his brother. Both were divine trouble-makers. He sent the matter to the arbitration of Inachus, Asterion and Cephissus, three river-gods of the region. They chose Hera, and Poseidon, in a rage, turned against the river-gods – his subordinates! – and shrank their streams so that even to this day their rivers run dry in summer.

‘It was, and is, hazardous to cross the Earth-Shaker, in whatever form he might appear. The people of Attica, though protected by the unconquerable arm of holy Athene, still remember his raging flood.

Faithfully, they guard his temple at Sounion, on the last headland of their ancestral shores. Below, at the foot of the cliff, as I myself have seen many times, beating up the channels of the Saronic gulf, the waters of the sea-god perpetually heave and growl, lest the people forget.'

By now, a morning breeze was beginning to disperse some of the cloud on Olympus. Rifts of light appeared, revealing long flanks of mountain dusted below with the green of beech and walnut but darkened on the upper slopes by the gloomy bristle of the firs. Then ridges ascended, gaunt with bare rock, and tumbled into the high cols, before soaring onward to the many peaks.

The day was warm and the travellers were making easy progress. The sun was brushing the eastern face of the mountain which seemed, in the friendly light, more a rampart and a comfort against the danger of the wilderness than a place of holy mystery. The boy, sitting on the neck of the ox that pulled the family cart, was still puzzled by the shifting shapes of Olympus. He peered up, seeing peak after peak suddenly unshrouded. How could it be that Hades had a place in such a world of light and space?

'Be quiet, foolish boy,' his nurse chided him. 'It is not wise to mention the name of Hades, the Invisible One, nor to speak about the Kingdom of the Dead. But since you are so ignorant of these matters, you must learn. That grim god has no place on Olympus. The lottery of the gods gave him the Underworld to rule, and he has enough to do in that sad place, overseeing the punishments decreed by the justice of Zeus. We avoid Hades, but we fear him and try to please him with many honourable names. We call him the Hospitable One, or the Good Counsellor. Of course, he is also Pluto, the Wealthy One, for he owns all the gold and silver and jewels that lie beneath the ground.

'Fortunately, being so busy, with so many damned souls to keep his eye on, Hades has little time to visit our lands, to scare us with his chariot of fiery gold and its four black horses. He listens below in darkness, piecing together the news of the world from the oaths and promises that people swear in his name, striking the ground as they do so. Sometimes, lust or curiosity will draw him out from the foul stink of Tartarus. He chased the nymph Minthe and would have raped her had not Persephone, his queen, intervened and changed the timid girl into the sweet-smelling mint. Another nymph, Leuce, was also saved in the nick of time and transformed into a white poplar. When he roams the earth he is dangerous, specially when he sneaks among us wearing the cap of invisibility made for him by the Cyclopes.'

'May kindly Zeus, fount of justice, keep us safe from his dark brother!' exclaimed the boy's mother, looking fearfully around as if the black horses of Hades might erupt from the ground beneath the

very feet of her ox.

‘And yet,’ she continued, ‘there is one particular god on Olympus whom we fear almost as much as Hades. I’m talking about Ares, the God of War, that savage god who came to disturb our peace from the barbarian wastes of the north.’

‘Now hold on,’ the Macedonian horse-breeder cried hotly. ‘You people of the south are always trying to blame your troubles on others. Don’t tell me that you had no wars before the horsemen – Achaeans and Dorians and others – came galloping out of the lands beyond the North Wind! Whose son is Ares? The son of Zeus and Hera, that’s who he is. His birthplace is right here on Olympus, right in the middle of all the Greek lands. This is where he belongs. If he’s treacherous and cruel, it’s no fault of us northerners. Look in your own souls and you’ll find dirty stuff there, too.’

‘I’ll admit we’re not perfect,’ the woman rejoined tartly.

‘But we need no lessons from your kind. I know the northerners, particularly the Thracians, well enough. They’re filthy, idle, bestial, covered with tattoos. They look like a freak show. They are ashamed to be seen working. Tilling the ground is a disgrace to them. All they do is fight and plunder, and then squabble over the spoils, like mangy dogs scavenging offal. And their habits! Disgusting. They keep a string of wives, like horses in heat. They let their daughters sleep with anyone, and then sell them to slave-traders.’

‘And who buys those girls?’ the horse-breeder shouted, rushing to the defence of all the north. ‘You southerners. You hypocrites.’

‘Widow-murderers! Dog-eaters!’

‘Effeminate boy-lovers! Pederasts!’

‘Ignorant brutes. The gods the Thracians worship are Bacchus and Artemis – the gods of boozing and hunting. But their favourite is their own god Ares, the god of destruction and hate.’

At this, the Macedonian, red with indignation but hating to lose his temper at a woman, appealed to Mantes.

‘You, poet, you’re supposed to know these things. What’s the truth about Ares?’

‘Many claim that he comes from Thrace,’ Mantes replied soothingly. ‘It’s true, too, that nobody wants him. Even Zeus hates his son. It is sometimes said – perhaps Zeus encouraged this story – that Hera conceived Ares by herself. She ate a magic flower and gave birth, and her son inherited her ungovernable temper. Zeus and his divine consort are always quarrelling, and perhaps we should forget these insults. The truth is that the violence of Ares goes beyond all reason, and that is why both gods and men avoid him. He has a lust for battle, sniffing after blood like a pig after truffles. Right and wrong mean nothing to him. He’ll fight at a whim and change sides just as easily.

Where the weapons clang, and the blood flows, and the most treachery is done – there you'll find Ares, hacking heads and limbs, with his sons, Phobos and Deimos, by his side. These are the ones we call Rout and Fear. They are his sons by Aphrodite, children of that infamous piece of adultery when Aphrodite's husband, Hephaestus, caught the heaving and panting lovers in his net.

'The God of War is a huge and powerful figure, and those bulging muscles attracted Aphrodite's ever-lustful eye. Ares knows how to swagger. His roar on the battlefield sounds like ten thousand men, and when he lies down his body measures two hundred paces. But despite his size, and his brutality, he is not always successful. Indomitable Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, beat him twice on the field of battle. Once, in the Trojan War, she guided the hand of Diomedes, who gave Ares such a wound that he went whining to Zeus. Later, Ares had the temerity to cast his spear at the goddess herself. Contemptuously, she caught the blow on her sacred breastplate, and the spear fell harmlessly. Then she felled him with a boulder. Aphrodite had to take him in her soft arms and help him slink away from the fighting. That was shame enough – to be rescued by the perfumed and wanton Goddess of Love. But even a hero could defeat Ares, and once Heracles gave him a good drubbing. And the two playful giants Otus and Ephialtes, while still in their childhood – though growing at the rate of a yard a year – caught Ares and imprisoned him in a bronze jar. There he stayed for thirteen months, growing weaker and weaker, until Hermes, the Messenger God, heard of his plight and released him.'

Talk of Ares made the travellers thoughtful. The God of War, with his violence and his blood-lust, reminded them of the way ahead, in lands where Greek gave way gradually to barbarian babble. The group drew in a little, forgetting differences in the need for mutual support. Even the Macedonian was quiet, though his face was still brick red and his moustaches quivered like battle pennants in the wind.

'That Ares,' an elderly Athenian burst out, glaring angrily at the heights of Olympus, 'he's a braggart and a bully. He sends many poor folk to the dark halls of Hades. Yet we speak of him with awe, even with grudging admiration. He's up there now, lolling in the courts of holy Olympus, dining on our respect, with a full share of our prayers and burnt offerings. I'm a man of peace, a craftsman, a maker of useful and beautiful things. I pray to Hephaestus, the Divine Smith, who has taught us the secrets of our art. Yet look how they treat *him* in heaven. He is the butt of divine jokes. Ares yawns at the feast of the gods, while Hephaestus limps around with the wine-cups. They laugh at him because he's lame and clumsy on his feet.'

'Ares is power,' Mantes murmured, 'and we are intimidated by that. The raw facts of life and death are what impress us most.'

But was that the whole story? Was there not a suspicion here also that Greek is good, foreign is bad? There were doubts about both Ares and Hephaestus. Ares, perhaps, was reluctantly allowed to be Greek, for he had, at least, the proportions and the presence, the godlike aspect, which all Greeks admired. But Hephaestus, busy at his forge, was lame and ugly and not at all glorious.

So the birth of Hephaestus was also subject to rumour, to innuendo. He was born prematurely, with his feet turned backwards, during the three hundred years when his parents, Zeus and Hera, kept their marriage secret. His mother, Hera, threw the babe out of heaven, because he looked so peculiar, and Zeus did not lift a finger to save him. They were ashamed of their child. Hephaestus fell in the sea where the gentle sea-nymphs Thetis and Eurynome found him. They took him and looked after him for nine years in an underwater grotto, where he set up his first workshop and began to make many beautiful things. Then Hera, impressed by a jewelled ornament that Hephaestus had made for Thetis, summoned her forgotten son back to Olympus. Again, he felt the wrath of his parents, for he stepped into one of their familiar quarrels, and Zeus hurled him once more from Olympus. He fell a full day and landed with broken legs on the island of Lemnos.

And Lemnos, some say, is his real home, not Olympus. He came to Lemnos from Caria, in Asia Minor, a strange, swarthy god with a hammer in his hand and a bellows under his arm. He is an eastern fire-god, and volcanic Mount Moschylos, on Lemnos, is his workshop. Hephaestus is a wizard, a wonder-worker in metals, a dabbler in laborious rites that the Greeks of old hardly knew. His looks are unworthy of a god. His preoccupation with menial tasks, his busyness, his skill itself, all demean the aloofness of a god.

‘As if looks are more important than skill,’ the Athenian scoffed. ‘We think like fools. There is more to life than noble warfare. What could we do without Hephaestus? We would still be living like animals – or Thracians – if he had not taken us in hand. His invention and his skill put the materials of the world at our command. While his wife Aphrodite is out deceiving him, playing the games of love – their marriage was surely a divine joke, a piece of malice against an outsider – Hephaestus is sweating at the forge, teaching us the dignity and usefulness of work. He has made fire into our servant. When the logs crackle and the sparks jump, we say, “Hephaestus is laughing.”’

‘Even though the other gods on Olympus mock him, look what he has done for them. He made a sickle for Demeter, so the corn may be cut. He fashioned a gold cup for Helios and forged the deadly arrows that Apollo and Artemis use. Heroes and mortals owe him debts as well. For Minos, King of Crete, he made Talos, the bronze giant. He made the gold and silver dogs that guarded the palace of Alcinous,

and the bulls with brazen feet that Jason set to the plough. Perseus and Agamemnon thanked the god, the first for his sword and the second for his sceptre. Achilles and Diomedes marched against Troy in the armour made by Hephaestus. All who prefer to live in the ease of a good house rather than in the squalor of byres and stables salute the Divine Smith. Hunched and grimy, with powerful shoulders and lame feet, he drags himself to the forge, always at work, and both heaven and earth are the better for his efforts.'

The merchant from Delos chuckled. 'You Athenians will worship any god, no matter where he comes from, so long as he helps you make things to sell. I'm a trader myself, and I, too, have sent many prayers to that clever Hephaestus for the latest goods and the best merchandise. But we don't need to rely on foreign gods, useful though they are. The greatest and the most truly Greek of the Olympians is radiant Apollo, the god from my own island of Delos. His mother, perhaps, came from Lycia, the wolf-country, but Apollo certainly represents all that we most admire in the character of our people – curiosity, intelligence, grace, and a generous heart.

'You remember the story? Zeus set his heart on the Titaness Leto, and, of course, Hera was jealous once more. Zeus pursued and Leto fled, from the River Xanthos across untold lands to the wastes of the Hyperboreans, where the sun hardly shines. In Lycia, she became a she-wolf, and at Didyma a quail. Zeus caught her there and, turning into a quail also, coupled with her, and she conceived twins. But still she had no rest, for Hera had decreed that no land where the sun shines would receive her. After many wanderings Leto begged the small and rocky island of Delos to let her rest and give birth. At this time, Delos was a mere scrap of land floating in the sea. It was one of the many islands that Poseidon, in a bad temper, had gouged with his trident out of the mainland and scattered into the Cyclades. Now little Delos was afraid. How could one offend Hera? The dragon Python, which she had sent from Pytho to harry Leto, was terrifying enough. How could this barren speck of rock support the dignity of a god? Surely, a divine child would stamp it in contempt to the bottom of the sea, to become a home for black seals, not men. But Leto swore by Styx – the holiest oath an Immortal can make – that her child would honour Delos and build his first temple there. Then Poseidon covered the island with waves, which the sun could not penetrate. Iris, a messenger of the gods, summoned the divine midwife Eileithyia. All the other goddesses, except Hera, were in attendance. No one was in doubt as to the greatness of this event. For nine days Leto was in labour. Then, clinging to a palm tree, she gave birth to twins. Holy Artemis leapt first from the womb and helped her mother deliver her twin, Apollo.

'No mother's milk was good enough for the new god. Instead, the goddess Themis fed him nectar and ambrosia brought from the court of Olympus. At once, Apollo burst from his swaddling clothes and rose up fully grown. And our Delos, the fortunate island, was fixed in its place and touched with gold. The leaves of the olives turned to gold, and gold swam in the River Inopus. Apollo blessed the island. He strode to the top of Mount Cynthus and held out his arms, saying: "The lyre and the bow shall be dear to me, and I will declare unto mankind the unfailing will of Zeus."

This tale pleased the travellers, for everyone knew that Apollo is the most glorious of the divine sons of Zeus. It eased the burden of the road to reflect on the grace of Apollo. He is the beacon of Olympus. As the sun splits the cloud to reveal the summit, so the radiance of Apollo illumines the Olympian court of the gods. When he enters there, all other deities stand. He hands his bow and his quiver to Leto and takes his place by his father's side. From there, he spreads his divine influence over the affairs of mankind. He is the God of the Lyre and the Patron of Music. To him, doctors owe their medicine. He watches over navigation, steadies the course by sun and stars, and guards our people in distant colonies. But most of all, he is the God of Prophecy.

Within four days of his birth, Apollo set out on his divine mission. In pursuit of the dragon who had made his mother's life a misery, he went first to Pytho, to the place now called Delphi. The Python, earth-coloured with shining scales, stood at bay, throwing huge coils around a laurel tree. But Apollo pierced the dragon with a volley of arrows. And when the wounded beast fled into a cave sacred to Ge, Apollo followed and killed it in the innermost sanctuary. Though the dragon was dead, Apollo had invaded a holy place, and Mother Earth called out to Zeus in protest at this sacrilege. Sentenced to exile and servitude, Apollo walked the road that became known as the Pythian Way, to the vale of Tempe. There, for nine years, he was the slave of King Admetus. Then, purified of guilt and wearing a wreath of laurel, he returned to Delphi with the added title of Phoebus, the Undefined. One thing more needed to be done. To appease Hera for the death of her dragon, he instituted the Pythian Games. Then Mother Earth relinquished her place and her prophecies to the purified Apollo.

'Such a place deserves such a god,' said a solemn man from Phocis. He was a messenger of the temple at Delphi, and though he travelled all the wild and beautiful lands where Greeks were settled, he could never erase from his mind the sombre chasm of Delphi, caught between the rust-red cliffs of the Phaedriades. From Mount Parnassus, capped with snow, the land fell away in rough slides and rock falls to this point where the Earth-Shaker clove it with a god's axe. The Castalian spring bubbled at the foot of the chasm, and close by that

was the fissure in the rock leaking the thin vapours which carried the prophetic voice of Apollo.

‘Delphi is the *omphalos*,’ said the messenger proudly, ‘the navel of the world. At the beginning of time Zeus sent two eagles, one from each end of the cosmos, to determine the centre of things. They met at Delphi. It was natural that Mother Earth should communicate to mankind from this spot. It was natural also that Apollo, when he took on that mantle of prophecy, should make his temple there. But who would build it and keep it? The god is wise, he is also resourceful. Some say the bees made him a shrine out of their wax. But we know that his temple was something grander than that. When this work had to be done, Apollo looked out to sea and saw a Cretan ship heading for Pylus. He dived into the waves in the form of a giant dolphin and boarded the ship. Huge and cheerful, he commandeered the deck and showed the captain the way to go. Landing at Crisa, the port of Delphi, Apollo transformed himself into a long-haired youth with a lyre, and leading the sailors on with caressing music he took them up the hillside to Delphi and set them to work. When the temple was ready he honoured the Cretans by making them his priests and initiating them into the service of the prophetic Pythia, the priestess who spoke in the voice of the god.

‘Then he revealed to them his first prophecy: “From now on, all of mankind will bring you gifts to learn from my wisdom. But if you do not deal justly, or if you become evil or too proud, others will come and force you from your place.”’

‘A humorous god,’ the travellers exclaimed, ‘and a just one, too.’

‘Glorious Apollo shows in his character everything that is attractive in humans also. But do not be fooled. The gods are jealous of their virtue and will not be mocked. Apollo gave King Midas the ears of an ass, for daring to prefer the music of Pan, the goat-legged God of Shepherds. Midas tried to hide his deformity under a Phrygian cap but could not keep it from his barber, who was sworn to secrecy. Put this talkative fellow could not contain himself, so he whispered the news to a hole in the ground. Some reeds growing nearby heard the secret, and when a breeze shook them they sighed for everyone to hear, “King Midas has the ears of an ass.”’

‘Even worse was the punishment given to Marsyas. This foolish satyr had come across a flute discarded by Athene, though it was still full of godlike music. When Marsyas blew into the flute the listeners exclaimed that Apollo himself could not make better music. Apollo was angry and, to put the satyr in his place, arranged a contest, with the nine Muses as judges. The condition of the contest was this: that the winner should do as he wished with the loser. At first, the Muses could not decide. Athene’s flute sounded as beautiful as Apollo’s lyre.

Then Apollo challenged Marsyas to sing and play at the same time, which no flute-player can do. Apollo played and sang hymns to the glory of the gods on Olympus, and when the Muses gave him the prize he took his revenge on the satyr. Able to do whatever he wished, he had Marsyas flayed alive. Then he nailed the skin to a plane tree by the riverside, as a warning to others who presumed to challenge a god.

‘For the rage of a god is a terrible thing, and not even Heracles was safe from the righteous anger of Apollo. When the greatest of heroes defiled holy Delphi with bloodstained hands and stole the tripod that the Pythia used for prophecy, Apollo would have transfixed him with one of his unerring arrows had not Zeus hastily intervened and reconciled his two sons, the one half-human and the other divine.’

‘Such cruel punishments, such anger,’ a timid voice cut in. ‘How do you explain it?’

The temple messenger frowned. He could not admit any criticism of Apollo.

‘Far-Shooting Apollo,’ he said severely, ‘punishes a few so that the many may learn. When we were rough and young, in the days when Ge guarded the sanctity of Delphi, too many of our people were savage, turbulent, without peace or justice. But Apollo taught peace and justice, though it took many a sharp lesson. Now, thanks to the god, things are different, as I know well. It is my task, as a herald from Delphi, to go out every four years to the furthest extent of the Greek lands, to proclaim the sacred armistice that belongs to the Pythian Games. Everywhere I go, I am received with feasts and joy. “Blessed Apollo,” the people sing, “he is the one who heals us; he banishes evil government; every house becomes pure by his power.” And as for his tolerance, do you not know that gracious Apollo, out of a kind heart, permits his holy place to be shared by Dionysus, the wild one, the orgiastic god? For three winter months every year Apollo leaves Delphi, to live among the Hyperboreans of the north. In those months, no hymns, no paeans are heard. The voice of the Pythia, pronouncing the oracular wisdom of the god, is silent.

‘But in the springtime, a chariot drawn by swans brings Apollo back to Delphi. And then, what gladness, what celebrations! The Pythia, the divine priestess, enters once more the *antron*, the sanctum where only she may go. She purifies herself, washing in the Castalian spring. She seats herself on the tripod, poised over the crack in the rock. She inhales the divine vapour. In her trance, she is inspired. She gives voice. Mankind listens, and is all the wiser.

‘Outside, in the porch of Apollo’s temple, two sentences are carved: “Nothing in excess” and “Know thyself”. That is the Greek way, the way to the wisdom of the gods of Olympus. It was not always so, in

the days before Apollo. Then blood was paid in blood, and murder was a holy deed. Apollo showed us the better way, that one could atone by catharsis, by penance and purification. "Ah, you new gods of Olympus," cried the Erinyes, those ancient and implacable Furies who made retribution their business, "you have kicked over the old laws, and we can grasp them no more."

The party of travellers had eaten a midday meal, pausing briefly by the roadside. Afterwards, in the heat and torpor of early afternoon, talk was fitful, the words dying away like a theme forgotten. Feet trudged on mechanically, and the animals swayed forward slowly, with drooping heads. The boy lay full-length in the family cart, staring into the sky through half-closed eyes. High in the heavens, the sun shone directly on the mountain, making the permanent snows of the peaks as bright as mirrors. Idly, the boy began to count.

'One, two, three, four, five,' he said in a dozy voice. 'There are the thrones of five of the Holy Ones, But should there not be one more Olympian god? Where is he?'

'That one is Hermes,' said Mantes, smiling as he walked by the wheel of the cart. 'Phoebus Apollo we all admire and respect. But Hermes is, if anything, even more Greek than Apollo. Listen, and I'll tell you about him.'

'Hermes, youngest of the gods of Olympus, is the son of Zeus and Maia, the daughter of Atlas. Zeus came often to Maia, and lay with her secretly, in a cave on Mount Cyllene, while Hera slept. Then the secret was out. On the fourth day of the month Hermes jumped into the world, and soon he had made himself known to all the land of Arcadia. He was born in the early morning; by noon he could play the lyre; in the evening he stole the cattle of Apollo. Nothing could satisfy his curiosity. In a moment, he was out of the cave and roaming around. Soon he found a tortoise plodding through the grass, and he had the spark of an idea. Hermes was never short of ideas, and no mischief was beyond him. He took the poor tortoise and killed it and turned its shell into a musical instrument, stringing it like a lyre. By noon he had already coaxed a tune from it. He thought, "The world is a lively place and worth investigating." So Hermes walked on, to the meadows of Peiria, where fifty cows belonging to Apollo were grazing. Here he had another idea. How amusing to steal the cattle! To disguise the tracks, Hermes drove the cows backwards, following with his own feet bound in twigs, to leave an indistinct trail. In the evening, by the River Alpheius, he slaughtered two cows with the proper ritual, made fire by rubbing two laurel sticks together, cooked meat and filled his belly. He hid the remaining animals in an olive

grove and in the night slipped back to the cave, tucking himself into his cradle as if nothing had happened.

‘Now, Apollo was both angry and puzzled by the theft. How was it done? An old farmer, who had witnessed the trick, gave him the clue, and soon Apollo was confronting the infant Hermes with a godlike rage. But Hermes, looking all innocence, snuggled into the bedclothes and pulled the covers up to his chin. “I, a mere baby, steal cattle?” he replied impudently. “Why, I’m too young to even know what a cow is.”’

‘O shame,’ the boy’s nurse burst out, ‘that you should fill the boy’s ears with such stuff. Thievery and lies.’

But the boy protested. ‘Good nurse, let him go on. I never knew there was such fun among the gods.’

‘It’s true,’ Mantes replied, ‘that Hermes is a trickster and a thief. But the divine power of the gods permits them to do everything that we can do, and are there not rogues amongst us? Besides, Apollo was not deceived. Taking a firm grip on the young god, he hauled him off for judgment at the court of Olympus. But Zeus was more amused than outraged. He liked the spirit of enterprise, the refusal to conform, the wild imagination. He told the half-brothers to make their peace, and that is what happened. Hermes gave Apollo his tortoiseshell lyre, in payment for the slaughtered cows, returned the rest of the cattle, and all was well between the two gods. Apollo even began to share a few mysteries with the youngster. He taught Hermes how to prophesy, using stones in water. And Hermes, ever quick to improve on any lesson, devised another method for himself, using knuckle-bones. Apollo, God of Enlightenment, was impressed by such intelligence and zest. He asked Zeus to allow Hermes into heaven. And Zeus, who had need of a brisk, imaginative god to act as intermediary between heaven and earth, graciously gave way. He welcomed Hermes to Olympus and invested him with the marks of his office: the broad hat of the wayfarer, and the *caduceus* of the divine messenger – the herald’s staff wound round with two snakes. The silver tongue, the quick eye, and the thieving fingers, Hermes did not have to be given. Those he had already.

‘A master of cunning, a robber, a cattle-rustler, a spinner of dreams, a watcher by night, a thief at the gates, a deviser of wonders – that is Hermes. But, on the whole, mankind had won a friend. Was there anything on earth Hermes could not do? He invented, or helped to invent, the musical scales, astronomy, the alphabet, the cultivation of olives, the balance for weighing, the measuring-rod. As the messenger of the gods he is the keeper of the road, and the guardian of all travellers. He sets up the ‘herms’, the piles of stones that guide men on their way. People should not be lonely or lost; no, they should join

together in assemblies and feasts and fairs, looking for entertainment and happiness. At the games, Hermes smiles on the athletes, though he may also, out of devilry, pick the pocket of the crowd. In the gymnasium, he is the patron of the wrestling and the boxing.'

'I like that friendly god,' the boy laughed. 'When I'm a man I'll not forget him in my offerings.'

'But be warned. Enthusiasm is sometimes dangerous. Hermes lacks judgment, and that is why he has the lowest place in the divine court of Olympus. Once, when amorous Zeus sent him to release the water-nymph Io, who was under the watchful guard of hundred-eyed Argus, Hermes lulled Argus to sleep but then cut out his eyes. Such cruelty disgusted the gods. They drove Hermes from their presence with a hail of stones. When a god is rash, who shall put right his errors? Beware lest, in anger or mistake, he sends you to the Underworld, where the dead souls wail. He will lead you by the hand to the banks of the Styx; for that, too, is one of his many duties.'

The boy looked thoughtful, but he was not frightened. He lay at his ease in the cart, rocking with the comfortable slow jog of the ox. The day was beginning to draw in. The ghostly eye of Selene, the moon, was just discernible in the heavens. Soon the travellers would stop for the night. In the firelight under the stars they would eat, then the day would be closed by a long sleep. The wall of Olympus, to the west, was a protection against the night things.

Warm shadows were creeping over the uplands and flooding into the gorges and the hollows of the mountain. But the declining sun, well on its way towards the encircling river of Oceanus, still bathed a brilliant light on the summit of Olympus. The gods held court, sustaining from on high all that is. It is right that Greeks do not talk of the sun setting. They say, instead, that it reigns in splendour.



Armed Aphrodite and Attendant

THE HOUR OF THE WOMEN

The sound of a strong stream rushing over rocks and gravel. At a bend in the path the little river came in view. The track dipped into a tumultuous swirl of water, which then plunged away down the hill, hurrying to lose itself in Poseidon's realm.

The leading matron of the party stopped at the edge of the stream and scooped up a bowl of water. She sipped, wrinkling her brow in concentration, testing for smell and taste. Then she smiled and pronounced herself satisfied. They had found the most important requirement of all travellers – good water. Now they could camp for the night.

After the men had unloaded the animals, they hobbled them and set them to graze. Then they went in search of a hollow, or a grove of trees, where they could set up shelter for the night. They took with them a lamb, which they would kill and roast for the evening meal. The preparation and cooking of meat was male business and no concern of the women. So the women were left to gather together the produce they had brought with them. They unpacked strings of onions, bags of lentils, chickpeas and beans, straw baskets of figs and raisins and cheese. They took from the panniers goatskins of wine and water, cooking pots, earthenware jars, decorated bowls glazed in sombre colours. Household slaves began to collect firewood. A baby suckled noisily at the nurse's breast. Two or three energetic children played catch and run in the bushes. A younger brother, too tired for games, sucked his thumb under the axle of an up-turned cart. The women set about their oft-repeated task, to impose on the wilderness a moment of comfort and relaxation.

When the bustle died down, and the fire was well lit, and the ingredients of the meal were prepared and mixed, the women and children, with maids and servants, all settled around the fire. This was the hour of the women. When they were gathered the old matron, thin and dignified in her long white tunic, stood and approached the fire. She drew the embroidered edge of her shawl over her head to ward

off the humours of the evening air. Taking a cup of pure water, she poured a libation. Then she offered a prayer to Hestia, the Goddess of the Hearth, eldest child of Cronus and Rhea. Hestia, gentlest of the gods of Olympus, is the Virgin One, about whom there is neither scandal nor controversy, though both Poseidon and Apollo vied for her hand in vain. She had sworn an oath on the head of her brother Zeus that she would remain forever a maiden. She is the peacemaker, the friend to women, the keeper of the household flame. Suppliants who reach her fire on the hearth are safe from prosecution, for Zeus honours her greatly. He has granted her the first victim of every sacrifice.

‘Praise be to Hestia indeed,’ sighed a young wife from Ionia, giving the dough for the bread a last smack. ‘Finally, she sends us women a blessed moment of quiet and relief. Just listen to our men out there. They set up camp as if they were fighting lions. Everything they do, even the smallest task, is done with such noise and fuss. How pleasant to be rid of them for a while. I sometimes envy my Carian ancestors. They wouldn’t eat with their husbands, nor even call them by name, because they were Greek invaders who had killed our menfolk and forced our poor girls into marriage. Why did we ever forgive them, I wonder, and allow them back to our board and our beds?’

She lay back on the grass, pillowed on clasped hands, and frowned at the bold, bare hills, looking sternly at them as if they were the bald heads of ancient senators.

A plump, jolly girl laughed. ‘Who are we to stand aside from the age-old battles of the sexes, which even the gods cannot avoid? Hestia is too modest. She puts herself beyond the strife by a vow of chastity. That’s not to everyone’s taste. Certainly not to mine. So why should I fare any better than Hera, Queen of Heaven? Did she not have much to suffer at the hands of Zeus?’

So much rested on the shoulders of All-Seeing Zeus, nothing less than the stability and order of the world. He would marry, but what partner could help him best read the deeply interleaved and barely understandable book of the universe? First, it is said, Father Zeus joined with the goddess Metis, whose name means wisdom. But any son from their loins was destined to topple Zeus, as he himself had thrown down his father Cronus. So Zeus swallowed Metis, to possess her wisdom and to prevent the birth of her child.

But Zeus could not sleep alone. It was his duty to populate the heavens with the many divine beings who give guidance to mankind. He called to his bed many goddesses and nymphs and spirits. He mated with Themis, the Titaness, and their children were Eunomia, Dice and Eirene – Good Government, Justice and Peace. By Eurynome, he fathered the three Graces. He lay with Mnemosyne, Goddess of

Memory, and she gave birth to the nine Muses, the spirits who inspire in mortals all the arts of the imagination.

‘Duty is good,’ protested the Ionian wife, ‘but where does duty end and lust begin? What cause was there for Zeus to force himself on his sister Demeter, or on timid Leto who fled from him so fast, or on Maia, daughter of the sky-supporting Atlas?’

‘So many assaulted and dismayed,’ added a slave-girl, stirring a pot on the fire. ‘He covered Danae in a shower of gold. So many other poor women undone.’

From the ring around the fire, other voices chimed in.

‘Leda, terrified by his feathered glory when Zeus came to her as a swan.’

‘Europa, carried away and forced by Zeus-the-bull.’

‘Callisto, changed into a bear and killed by Artemis’ arrow.’

‘Unsuspecting Niobe, first human ever to lie with a god.’

‘Semele, turned to ashes by the blazing splendour of the King of Heaven.’

‘Poor deceived Alcmena, tricked by that same King when he took on the form of her husband.’

‘Are we nothing more than bodies for bed-work and breeding?’ lamented a bitter farmer’s wife from Boeotia. ‘Men hunger for us, but fear us like the plague. They blame us. They say we flaunt those secret parts that make them go weak at the knees. Hesiod, my own sour old countryman, says that Zeus and Hera argued whether men or women took the most pleasure in sex. They put the question to the prophet Teiresias, one who’d been both man and woman. He said: “A man’s joy in sex rates only one in ten. But a woman gets ten full measures.” Thus they brand us as nymphomaniacs. The truth is, men are afraid of womanhood and what it represents. Secretly, they want to treat us like oxen. Hesiod – may Hades give him work in the stews of Tartarus! – also said: “Get a house, a field, an ox, a plough, and a slave-girl – not a wife – and all will be well.” For men. Do they learn this from the gods?’

The matron, the foremost woman among the travellers, was a little shocked by these outbursts. She came from an aristocratic family and knew her duty to the gods.

‘The power of Zeus, the potency of the Father,’ she said sharply, ‘is a great and necessary power. But it is dangerous if it is not curbed. That was the task of Hera, his co-ruler on Olympus and his divine wife. It was natural that Zeus should be drawn to Hera, so handsome, so stately, the daughter of mighty gods. But cold, it must be admitted. Though mother to four of Zeus’ children, she was never hot nor wanton.

‘The campaign for Hera’s heart was long and stormy. Many are the

stories of their troubles. Once, in the woods of Argos, Zeus caused a tempest. Then, turning himself into a cuckoo, he fled from the storm into the shelter of Hera's robe. She comforted the frightened bird, but Zeus rose in majesty and tried to ravish her. In Euboea, maddened by her "will I, won't I?", Zeus abducted her to Mount Cithaeron. When searchers came to look for her, he claimed that he was busy in the arms of Leto and must be left alone. Then, also on Cithaeron, Zeus tried to force her hand through jealousy. He pretended to marry another. He had a log of wood dressed as a bride, but when a furious Hera broke up the marriage procession the log was undressed to much laughter. Would they ever be reconciled enough to marry? Well, at last they did marry, though the people of Samos claim it was kept secret for three hundred years, to allow an end to hostilities and a godly consummation. Naxos, Euboea and Crete all wanted the honour of the marriage feast. But instead it took place in the palace where the waters of Oceanus touch the farthest western shore. All the gods brought gifts. Mother Earth gave a tree with golden fruit, which Hera planted in the nearby garden of the gods. She appointed the Hesperides, the daughters of Atlas, as the keepers of the garden, and set a dragon at the gate to watch and guard.

'But not even three hundred years of love, on a bed of hyacinths under a golden cloud, could restrain Zeus' monstrous sexual appetite. Hera suffered. Her nature, never warm, froze to ice, and her temper was short. Those who crossed her, she drove to frenzy or madness, as she did the god Dionysus and the hero Heracles. She whipped up storms, she sent pestilent clouds of insects. She struck Teiresias blind and sent the Sphinx to ravage Thebes. Sometimes she went too far. Her son Hephaestus did not forgive her when she threw him out of heaven on account of his ugliness. In revenge, he made her a golden throne which was also a secret trap. When she sat on it, she was held fast, and none of the other gods could release her. She was imprisoned there until Dionysus made Hephaestus drunk and stole the key.'

'Poor lady, to be driven to such distraction,' said a voice from the shadows. 'It was the fault of Zeus.'

'Yes, the Thunderer was the cause of her misery. At last, she was driven to rebel. She plotted with Poseidon and Apollo, who were also angered by Zeus' arrogance and temper. They joined together in revolt. They caught Zeus asleep, with a full belly after dinner, and bound him with a hundred knots. He roared and threatened. But he was entangled in a web of rawhide ropes, and the plotters laughed to see that he could not reach his thunderbolts. Thetis, the Nereid, heard both the rage and the mockery and she went pale. Fearing another War of the Gods, she hurried to fetch hundred-handed Briareus from Tartarus. A hundred knots were no trouble for his hundred hands, and

in a moment Zeus was set free. Then he took his revenge. Hera, the ring-leader, was suspended from the sky in manacles, with an anvil fastened to each ankle. She was only released when she swore never again to rebel against her divine husband.'

The women were silent in sympathy. Hera was their goddess, their protector, and every blow against her was a blow against womanhood. They felt her indignity and pain. The cruel pull of the anvils weighed on them too, reminders of their burden, their suffering under custom, insolence and stupidity.

But one of the group was not impressed. A *hetaera*, a courtesan of the temple of Aphrodite at Corinth, was stretched elegantly on a rug of suspicious oriental luxury, a pattern of stylized panthers and lions in an angular green jungle. A small and painted slave-girl had spread the rug on the thickest patch of grass she could find, at some distance from the domestic huddle of wives and families around the fire. Here the courtesan was giving herself careful attention, fastidiously scrubbing her teeth with a willow twig, massaging her arms and legs with aromatic oils, trawling her face for wrinkles in a polished metal mirror.

When she was satisfied with her complexion, she gave herself a little smile and drawled into the silence.

'With the greatest respect to the divine Hera, who is, of course, the Queen of the Gods, I can't help wondering if she is really a victim of her husband's selfish ways. Might we not blame, instead, her own shrewish temper, her spite and her bad grace? The fact is, she's not womanly enough to hold her lord and husband. She lacks the arts of love. It's not that she despises them – just that she's no good at them. She tried, as the poets have often told us. They've left us a pretty picture: Hera, naked, cleansed with ambrosia, then anointed top to toe with perfumed oil strong enough to make heaven and earth swoon. She brushed her hair until it was like spun gold and plaited it into a regal braid, set off with jewels. She slipped into a robe embroidered for her by Athene herself. Around her hips was a girdle with a hundred golden tassels. A triple cluster of pearls hung from each ear. On her feet were sandals as light as air. She was ready to overwhelm the senses of amorous Zeus.

'No, this is not a goddess without conceit. And did she not challenge Athene and Aphrodite for the title of "the fairest"? The apple was the prize, and Paris was the judge. O, Hera certainly had her eye on that delicious youth. But what was the result of all this? Her seduction of Zeus – all that painting and primping – would have come to nothing had she not begged a love-spell from Aphrodite. And the judgment of Paris was no contest. The apple went to Aphrodite, who offered young Paris the most powerful promise of all – the gift of love. Let Hera learn

from Aphrodite, my own sweet Lady of the soft arms, that envy and stiff-necked pride are poor substitutes for an understanding of the heart.'

'We thank you for your professional opinion,' the Ionian wife called out insultingly, 'but we need no lessons from the Goddess of the Bed.'

'That's where you're wrong,' the courtesan replied with calm good humour. 'I would lay odds that the beautiful lady whom you scorn has had more influence on the affairs of both gods and men than Pallas Athene, with all her holy wisdom. In fact, to know the nature of Aphrodite is, for mankind, the best wisdom of all.'

'If lechery is wisdom, and adultery is sense!'

'You forget,' the courtesan went on sweetly, 'that Aphrodite is the oldest of the Olympian gods, born of the foam when the severed genitals of Uranus were flung in the sea, long before Zeus was conceived. The gods mock her but neither god nor mortal can avoid her universal influence. She smiles at their mockery and remains untouched. Helios, driving the chariot of the sun through the sky, spied her passionately at play with Ares, in the marriage bed of her husband, Hephaestus. The lame god trapped them there, covering them with an unbreakable net, and invited all Olympus to laugh and stare. What did Aphrodite care? She'd tasted ecstasy and, when at last released, went quietly to Cyprus, to bathe in the waves from which she had been born and so renew her virginity. She knows very well that of all gods and mortals only Hestia, Artemis and Athene can resist her spells and her magic. She bewitched Dionysus, and their son is Priapus, a little imp of a god with a giant phallus. She wrestled in bed with ill-mannered Poseidon. Hermes, in his usual way, won her favours by a trick. For his fraud he fathered Hermaphroditus, a child both male and female.

'Among humans, she strikes impartially, bringing joy or anguish. She was kind to Pygmalion, who made an ivory statue in her image and then fell in love with his own handiwork. She gave the statue life and Pygmalion, most fortunate of men, was able to marry a woman formed in the likeness of the goddess. She blessed Anchises with one night of love, coming to him as he tended his flocks on Mount Ida. In the morning she swore him to secrecy and promised him a son, Aeneas, whose name would be famous in the annals of mankind. A human heart can hardly keep from bursting after such possession. When he was drunk, Anchises could not help boasting, and for this indiscretion Zeus struck him down with a thunderbolt.

'Who can deny that love and death are closely intertwined, the one is worth the other? Myrrha, daughter of King Cinyras of Cyprus, thought she was as beautiful as Aphrodite. So the goddess, to teach her a lesson, filled her heart with incestuous love and she lay with her

father. When the King learnt he was deceived he would have killed Myrrha, but she prayed for help and was turned into a balsam, or myrrh, tree. After nine months the bark of the tree split and the handsome boy Adonis stepped out. He was so good-looking that even Aphrodite herself wanted him, and so too did Persephone, Queen of the Underworld. The rival goddesses agreed uneasily to share him. But Aphrodite lured Adonis away with her magic girdle, causing Persephone to appeal to Ares for help. The brutish Ares knew only one way to settle disputes. He turned himself into a wild boar and charged Adonis as he hunted on Mount Lebanon. Severely gored, Adonis bled to death. Red anemones grew out of his bloodstains. And Aphrodite, rushing to his side, was also hurt, cutting her limbs on the thorns of a briar. Roses, which had once been only white, were now tinged with red. From the pain of passion comes beauty. From dying love comes renewed life. When Aphrodite first rose up from the sea and stepped from the scallop-shell that carried her to the shore of her beloved Cyprus, tender blooms and the greenest of grass sprang immediately from beneath her feet. Such, even among plants and dumb things, is the procreative power of love.'

The force of passion – that was something every woman could reflect on. The courtesan, in her shameless way, had put the case for the power of love. But what of the dark side? Neither gods nor goddesses were immune from the failings of the heart, though it was often a tyranny they would thankfully avoid. Even Demeter, daughter of Cronus and Rhea, Goddess of the Corn and the Harvest, was powerless against corrupting passions, which pursued and stung her like summer gadflies.

Demeter, as everyone knows, is mild and kind. She watches tenderly over nature, but even when there is an offence against her bounty she is not vindictive. In Thessaly, she warned Erysichthon not to waste wood from her own sacred grove to make beams for his banqueting hall. But Erysichthon took his axe to the grove, and only then did Demeter afflict him with perpetual hunger, so that he ate his way through his wealth until he was reduced to beggary, rooting for scraps by the highway. Her whole care was given to nature, to everything that grows and fruits. She had no time and little inclination for matters of sex. But perhaps it was her tenderness itself that attracted the attentions she did not want.

In her youth, the Titan Iasius had tumbled her in a thrice-ploughed field, though Zeus struck the Titan dead for daring to touch a goddess of Olympus. She turned herself into a mare to run away from Poseidon, but the God of Horses became a stallion and mounted her. Zeus himself lusted after his gentle sister. How could she resist? He possessed her and she gave birth to Persephone, who is also called

Core, a most pretty child but destined to be as sadly used and abused as her mother.

Demeter raised her daughter in all innocence, secluded in Sicily, far from the broad paths trod by gods and men. But Hades, Lord of the Underworld, saw Persephone and desired her. Demeter would not hear of a marriage – to lose her daughter to the Kingdom of the Dead! So Hades planned to abduct her. On a summer's day, when Persephone was gathering flowers in the fields of Enna, she saw a single white narcissus placed by Ge among the violets and irises and hyacinths. As she picked the flower, the earth opened. A golden chariot with four black horses, whipped on by Hades, burst from the split earth. With one arm he scooped the terrified girl from the ground, and then they plunged together into blackness.

Demeter set out to find her daughter. The trail was obscure. No one could tell her what had happened, or where her daughter had gone. Taking two torches from the fires of Aetna to light her way, Demeter wandered from land to land. At the passing of her sad figure, the crops withered and the ground became barren, for in her desperation she forgot to sustain the work of nature. Grim and unrecognizable, she came to Eleusis, where King Celeus and his wife, Metaneira, received her kindly. She said she was an unhappy woman who had lost her child, so Metaneira, who needed a nurse, invited her to look after her own son Demophoon. Demeter was touched, and in gratitude she decided to make the little boy immortal. But as she held Demophoon over the fire, to purge him of mortality, Metaneira entered and screamed in fright. The child fell in the fire and died. Then Demeter rose in god-like splendour and for this unlucky intervention imposed certain rituals on the queen. When these were done Demeter relented and taught the queen and the people of Eleusis her Mysteries, which ever afterwards have been celebrated in the name of the goddess.

Now, Celeus had an older son called Triptolemus, who had been away in the fields, looking after the king's cattle. When he returned to the palace he told a strange tale. One day, he had seen the earth open, and after a rush of fetid wind, stinking of decay, a team of black horses drawing a golden chariot thundered out of the chasm, and a dark charioteer had plucked a girl from the field and then they all disappeared. At once, Demeter knew Persephone's fate, for only Hades drove the golden chariot with the black horses. Demeter cried out for justice and begged Zeus to order the release of her daughter from the Underworld.

Within his own dark realm, Hades took no orders, even from Zeus. But the world was starving while Demeter grieved. Because of this dearth, Hades agreed reluctantly to let Persephone go. She prepared to depart. With a light heart, she plucked a pomegranate to sustain her

on the journey to the upper air. But the pomegranate is the fruit of the dead, and those who taste it shall see the world no more. The Fates have decreed it, and not even the gods can alter that decision. At best, the gods could only arrange a compromise, which allowed Persephone to spend a portion of the year away from the hall of Hades.

So in spring and summer Persephone comes into the light of the bright sky and stays in the palace of her mother. Then Demeter smiles, and the crops flourish, and the fruit ripens on the tree. But when winter comes Persephone retreats to the Underworld and sits in gloomy state by her husband, Hades, ruling over the battalions of the dead. Then Demeter's face is clouded and she pulls her mantle over her head. The summer flowers die, and the leaves fall from the trees, and the earth is in mourning, dark and barren.

Now the preparation of the meal was in full swing. Pleasant flames drifted from boiling pots. Cakes of dough baked on the hot stones, covered with a handful of ashes. Children, hungry and tired of games, snatched titbits from the edge of the fire. From time to time, a small head received a resounding slap. Into the long summer dusk, the fire cast a circle of comfort. It was a haven, administered by women with their many tasks, giving shelter against the doubts of the coming night. The women were busy, but not too busy to release a sigh for Demeter, held on the rack of others' desire.

The Ionian wife was always ready to give voice to the indignation of women.

'One goddess, at least,' she burst out, 'is fierce, and chaste, and unwounded by the darts of love. Artemis, great Apollo's twin, has her bow and her unerring arrows and knows how to shoot straight. She supports us. She is the protector of the child-bed and the Nurse of Youth. Brontes, the Cyclopes, made her a silver bow. Pan sent her from Arcadia ten ferocious hunting dogs, as swift as deer and as strong as lions. Unwise is the person who opposes her. She, of all the Olympians, has the moral courage to stand between male lust and male actions. She shot the giant hunter Orion when he tried to rape the maiden Opis. She turned her favourite follower Callisto into a bear when she forgot her vow of virginity and fell into the arms of Zeus. The giants Otus and Ephialtes, though huge and riotous, and with no respect for the gods, had to face her anger. When they made a lewd attack on herself and on Hera, Artemis caused a deer to start up between the giants. Each of them flung a spear, but in their excitement they missed the deer and killed each other. It is a warning to those with hot breath and groping hands.'

'Nonsense, a lament of the frigid,' interrupted the courtesan. 'Your

Artemis is merely the patroness of hunting. She is called the Goddess of the Wild Beasts, and she is as savage as her clients – bloodthirsty and mean. She killed poor Actaeon, because he saw her naked. What prudery! A true woman glories in her body. But Artemis turned Actaeon into a stag and he was torn apart by his own hounds. She filled Admetus' wedding-bed with snakes, because he was busy with guests and forgot to greet her at the wedding. And when Oeneus also neglected her rites at a harvest festival, she sent a wild boar to ravage his land. Such mean-minded spite! And that story about Orion – I can tell you other versions. Some say Artemis was jealous of Orion, who loved Eos and not her. But her real reason for jealousy was Orion's prowess as a hunter. He boasted that he could clear the whole world of wild animals, and this was too much for both Apollo and Artemis. They sent a scorpion to attack Orion. He tried to escape by swimming but Artemis, to show her skill, took long-range aim at his head in the waves and pierced his skull with a single arrow. The gods placed Orion in the constellations of the night sky, but what remedy was that for the poor fellow?

'No, there's not much to admire in your hunting goddess. Hera revealed her true status when she boxed her ears. The gods of Olympus were arguing over the course of the Trojan War. Artemis' speech was biting and without respect, but you know that Hera, for all her faults, is every inch the Queen of Heaven. "O, you're a lioness among women," she scornfully told Artemis, "and you may shoot humans like vermin. But you'll find it better sport to slaughter dumb beasts than to try conclusions with me." Then Hera grabbed the bow and the quiver, and cuffed the goddess once or twice, and sent her snivelling to Zeus, to hide like a pigeon in her father's lap.'

'Peace, friends, peace,' the elderly matron held up her hands. 'We begin to sound like a council of ministers. Let us not quarrel like menfolk. Remember, we women have one true champion whose power is always equal to the task. Athene, Goddess of Wisdom, is also called Parthenos, the Virgin. It is a title that she bears out of serenity and confidence in her sex. She is not intimidated by the muddle of the heart and the desire of males. On Olympus, in full armour and with spear at the ready, standing with the owl of wisdom on her shoulder and the crested helmet of battle on her head, Athene waits by the throne of Zeus, at one with her father, an intimate sharer in his knowledge and strength. She is his favourite daughter, his "dear grey-eyes", and often she carries his aegis and his thunderbolt.

'Everything about her birth and upbringing is impressive, a hint of future greatness. Zeus swallowed Metis, for fear of a son. But Metis was already pregnant with a girl. When Zeus was walking by Lake Tritonis, in Africa, he was gripped by a raging headache, caused by

the infant struggling to be born. So bad was the pain, Zeus begged Hephaestus to strike open his skull. Hephaestus swung his axe, and out leapt Athene, fully armed, shaking her spear and sounding her warcry. It was a moment of terror. Even the Sun hesitated in his track, until the children of the Sun in consternation hurried to Rhodes to honour the new deity. In their rush, they forgot fire for the offering, but Athene, who is as gracious as she is stern, was well pleased. She looked kindly on the island of Rhodes. She granted the people a supreme skill in craftsmanship, so that they made statues that lived, and she permitted them to make sacrifices without fire.

‘From the beginning, Athene was a warlike goddess. In her youth she practised arms with a girl companion called Pallas. One day, when tempers were a little heated, Zeus had to thrust his aegis between them. Distracted by this, Pallas did not see Athene’s blow, which killed her. In sorrow and repentance Athene took on her dead friend’s name and became Pallas Athene. She also made an image of Pallas and covered it in her own aegis. This was the famous Palladion, which fell from heaven upon Troy and on which the luck of the city rested. When Diomedes and Odysseus stole it, at the end of the Trojan War, Troy was doomed. Athene became formidable in arms and no warrior dared to stand against her. Even gods quaked at her name. But, unlike Ares, she always uses the power of her arm on the side of right and justice. For her, war is the grim remedy against tyranny. That is why she twice sent murderous Ares fleeing from the field with her contemptuous blows. And that is why she fought so steadfastly for us Greeks in the Trojan War. Helen’s abduction, by the Trojan prince Paris, cried out for justice. Menelaus and the Greek armies had right on their side.’

‘Greeks, yes,’ complained a soldier’s wife from Tiryns, a tough-looking woman giving the soup ladle a fierce twirl. She resented Athenian pride and superiority. ‘That business at Troy was our fight – the people of Argolis under our commanders Agamemnon and Menelaus. Athene stood by us then, I’ll admit it. But why does she always show such favour to the Athenians? The rest of us – from Laconia to Achaea, from Elis to Euboea – are we not as Greek as they are?’

An Athenian came quickly to the defence of her city, for it is a place never short of glib tongues.

‘Naturally, Pallas Athene prefers our city,’ she snapped. ‘It bears her own sacred name. She struggled for the city and means to keep it. Poseidon, the surly sea-god, tried to take it from her. He struck the rock of the Acropolis with his trident and gave the people a miracle. A saltwater spring began to flow. We still see it today, under the porch of the Erechtheion. But wise Athene gave us a greater benefit. With a

touch of her spear she made an olive tree grow, and soon there were olive groves and prosperous agriculture. No wonder the gods awarded Athens to her, not Poseidon.

‘Then Athene became part of our history. She suffered on our land – how can we deny her claim to us? Hephaestus, the lame smith, lusted after her but Athene, who had vowed to remain a virgin, fought him off, even at the gates of the city. In the struggle, he spilt his seed on the ground. Ge, the Earth, was fertilized and she gave birth to Erichthonius. She handed the baby to Athene – for was she not a kind of foster mother? – who hid the infant in a chest which she gave for safe-keeping to the three daughters of Cecrops, King of Athens, half man and half serpent. The contents of the chest were a secret. But Aglauros, his eldest daughter, was too curious. She raised the lid and showed her sisters. What did they see? No one knows. Perhaps a baby in a nest of snakes, perhaps a snake-child. But the sight drove them mad, and they jumped from the Acropolis to their death. A crow brought the news to Athene while she was out collecting a boulder for the fortification of the walls. In her anger she dropped the gigantic stone and cursed the crow. The boulder became the hill of Lycabettus, and the crow turned from white, which all crows used to be, to the accursed colour black.

‘But Athene did not remain angry with Athens. When Ares killed Halirrothius, for raping the daughter of Aglauros, the goddess set up her court in Athens. This was the Areopagus, the court before which even the war-god Ares had to appear, to be judged by Athene and the citizens of Athens. Ares was banished for a period of slavery. And ever after Pallas Athene attended the Areopagus, the highest court of mankind. In judgment, when she threw her pebble to cast her vote, she always threw it on the side of mercy.’

Athene has mixed justice with mercy, and the world thanks her for it. Though she is indomitable in a good cause, when the battle is done she extends the olive branch from her own sacred tree and binds angry opponents to peace and reconciliation. This is reason enough for gratitude, but mankind has other gifts to thank her for. Dance and music come under her care. Both the flute of peace and the trumpet of war belong to her. She is the tamer of horses and showed the hero Bellerophon how to manage Pegasus, the wild winged horse. She encourages all acts of craftsmanship. She helped the Argonauts build their ship and taught Epeius how to make the wooden horse that brought the walls of Troy tumbling down.

But more than anything else Athene is the comforter and the help-mate of women. When Zeus created Pandora, the first woman, Athene gave her a soul. When women needed arts, Athene gave them those, too. She taught them spinning and weaving and pottery. Nor is she

ashamed, when she can set aside for a moment her duties as Champion and Counsellor of mankind, to watch over the kitchen as Goddess of the Cooking-pots. The skill of woman's hand is no mean matter, and not to be slighted. Arachne was the greatest weaver in Lydia, but she was too proud of her skill. Athene warned her against presumption. Modesty is a virtue in women. But still Arachne boasted, so Athene in disguise challenged her to a weaving contest. To reinforce her warning, Athene wove a story of punishments given to those who annoyed the gods. But Arachne, foolish woman, wove into her web divine indiscretions, adulteries and scandalous affairs. In a rage, Athene beat her with the shuttle of her loom, so that Arachne at last knew her offence and hanged herself. But Athene, advocate of mercy, saved her life. She turned Arachne into a spider so that she could weave to her heart's content without offence to gods or mortals.

The sun at last had dipped below the horizon and Heliuss began unbackling his horses in the stables of Oceanus. The snowy frieze of Olympus showed silver in the young moonlight. Out of the growing dark came the crunch of many feet, and the hubbub of male voices suddenly too loud in night stillness.

The wife from Ionia turned her head and listened. An ironic smile slowly formed on her lips. 'Come, children, stop your squalling and misery now. Set out the pots and dishes. At last we can eat. The men are returning, and I smell the roast lamb they bring. And in what triumph! Such enterprise, and skill, and dedication! Now, indeed, the human race is ready to continue – if Hera and Demeter and Pallas Athene will only bless us women with children.'



Triptolemus Receives Corn from Demeter

MYSTERIES

D flash to his horses,’
He had meant to say, ‘Now we are among savages,’ but he had stopped himself, in case the wilderness had ears.

He looked around fearfully, kneading his hands and cracking the joints of his fingers. They were in strange country, near Meteora. The ground erupted into sugar loafs, humpbacks, needles, spires of rock, some more than a hundred feet in height, rising out of a grassy plain as calm as parkland. Behind the fractured rocks, a range of sullen grey hills shed boulders and scree into the valleys. Beyond, to north and east, were large desolate vistas, rolling landscapes as patched and scabby and scuffed as the disintegrating coat of an old donkey.

Once safely through the dangerous funnel of the pathway between the mountain and the sea, the travellers had split into smaller groups, veering off into the wide regions of the north. The merchant, with his packhorses and his servants, intended to go through Thessaly and Macedonia into Thrace, before hurrying home by the shortest route. He had brought jewels and plate and trinkets, bolts of dyed and embroidered cloth, earthenware pottery, samples of weapons with gilded hilts and decorated blades. Things to please the barbarian eye. He hoped to return with skins, precious metals and uncut stones. But he was apprehensive. He tried to balance profit against danger, and the equation made his head ache. The gods of these parts had a rough sense of humour and a hearty appetite for blood.

‘I tremble when I cross the River Peneius,’ the merchant confided to Mantes. ‘The cornlands give way to pasture. Centaurs prowl, as vicious as men and as powerful as horses. Woods and hills are full of the noisy riot of unpredictable beings – drunken Sileni, insatiable Satyrs, frenzied Maenads. Where the ploughing stops, where corn no longer grows, Demeter protects no further. Then we are at the mercy of Dionysus.’

Whenever he crossed the Peneius, the merchant prayed: ‘Holy Demeter, stay with me now.’ She was his touchstone. Only Demeter

could foster the conditions of civilization, that happy state that lies on the other side of violence, rage and lust. Gentle Demeter had been tempered by sorrow in the long search for her daughter. At the end of that trial lay peace and a state of grace. Demeter smiled once more, and the corn grew and the harvests were gathered in. These are the gifts of civilization. Where Apollo rules there is order. Where Demeter is worshipped, nature releases her bounty to mankind and angry passions subside. Beyond this jurisdiction lie the danger lands.

Demeter blessed the mortals who were kind and gave her help in the search for Persephone. At Eleusis, Celeus and Metaneira had found her in disguise, sad-eyed and travel-stained by the Well of Maidenhead. They gave her a drink of barley water flavoured with mint and took her into their palace and made her the nurse of their child. In gratitude, Demeter made the royal family of Eleusis the first priests of her temple, showing them her Mysteries, and promising certain glories in the afterlife to all who followed this secret way. Triptolemus, son of Celeus and Metaneira, a youth specially favoured by the goddess, received the seed of the corn from her own hand, and she taught him to yoke oxen and sow the seed. He tilled the level plain between Eleusis and Athens, and reaped the harvest and took it to the threshing floor which he had also made according to Demeter's instructions. When that was done, Demeter gave him a chariot drawn by winged dragons and ordered him to carry the seed-corn, and to spread the secret of agriculture, into all lands. In time, Triptolemus became King of Eleusis, the priest of her Mysteries, and the guardian of her cult.

The merchant remembered this old story among the pinnacles and canyons of Meteora, while big slow birds looped ominously overhead. Somewhere there was death in the valley and the scavengers were circling. In these lands, death came suddenly and soon. The merchant was afraid to think of death. He yearned for life and the solemn life-giving order of the Mysteries. The innermost rituals of Demeter were a secret that none would reveal, even on pain of death. But with what fervour, and what love for the goddess, did her initiates dwell on the memory of her public ceremonies and the outward signs of her glory! The Lesser Mysteries were held in Anthesterion, the month of spring flowers. The chief festival, the Greater Mysteries, began before the autumn sowing, in the month of Boedromion.

'This is the time when our hearts swell most with pride and devotion,' the merchant recalled. 'On the fourteenth day of Boedromion, the priests of Demeter carry the sacred objects from the Hall of Initiation, in Eleusis, to the goddess' other sanctuary below the Acropolis in Athens. Next day, the festival begins. The public come to the Painted Stoa in the Agora, and all are welcome, even slaves. Only

murderers, and those unlucky people who can't speak our language, are excluded.

'For two days there are public ceremonies, sacrifices, rites of purification. For the initiates, us Mystai, this joyful time passes with impatience. We are waiting for the return. Our spirits surge in anticipation towards Eleusis. On the nineteenth we begin the preparation that will take us into the secret heart of the goddess. At noon, the sacred objects are collected and the procession forms to make the half-day's journey to Eleusis. With torches and singing and dancing we set out. We are setting foot on the Sacred Way of the soul, the straight way to grace and knowledge. At intervals we stop and pray at shrines set up for Iacchus, the cult-god of our Mysteries, who is in some sense Demeter and in some sense Dionysus, though I hardly dare breathe a mention of these hidden matters. It is night when we reach Eleusis. The torches have multiplied and we enter as if under a rain of fire. For two days we look into our souls, meditating alone on the seashore or wandering the wild places, as Demeter had done in her search for Persephone. We come to share her suffering. Then we are ready for the final act. We enter the Hall of Initiation and close the door on profane eyes. There is a sound of music and of a vast sacred drama being enacted – that, at least, one may hear from the outside. No lips may speak of the Mysteries within. But we who have been in the Hall of Initiation emerge rapt and content. Now, however long we may live, we are prepared for death. Through the grace of Demeter, we have become Persephone's servants and we have her promise of certain blessings in the afterlife...'

The voice of the merchant trailed away. Had he already said too much, given away divine secrets? He looked around nervously, but he only saw incomprehension or mild derision on rough and homely faces. The merchant's group, sedate and slow-moving, was mixed with local traffic on the road – drovers, horsemen, carters, tribal warriors who might in a sudden excess of spleen turn into bandits or robbers. To all of them, he was the curiosity. Townsman! they thought. And a southerner to boot. A poor fish, lacking in manly courage, muddling life with mystical sentimentality. So neat, with his little curly beard, and his bald patch tucked under a fur cap, and his clean white linen tunic, and smart ox-hide boots halfway up his skinny shanks.

'Well, that's a pretty speech,' said a drover, walloping the rump of a stubborn animal. 'Demeter is a great goddess, and we owe her thanks for the harvest. But it seems to me she might allow a little more fun. The question is not what will happen when Death leads us down to the Court of Persephone. We want to know how to get the best out of this life. You talk of Boedromion. I'm thinking also of that hot lazy month. The artichokes are in flower and the crickets chirp in the trees.

Goats are at their plumpest. Young girls are free and easy, giving us the wink, but Sirius has got us parched and we are dying for a flask of a good vintage.'

'A bit of shade and a drink, eh?' cried his fellow herdsman, putting his shoulder to an ox's steaming flank. 'A shady rock and the wine of Biblis, and perhaps a lump of goat's-milk curds and the roasted meat from a young heifer. It's a great thing to sit in the shade and sip the bright wine, while Zephyrus' breeze cools the brow, and the stream gurgles out of the clear spring. Then I'll thank the gods. I'll pour three libations of pure water, and add a fourth of wine for good luck.'

This raised a shout of approval. 'What's the old saying? Where there's no wine, there's no love, and man has no further joy.'

'That's what we believe up here in the north,' a young horseman cavorting on the edge of the group called out cheerfully. 'Dionysus is our god. Born and raised here, or so they say. We lift the wine-cup in his honour. And then we do it again, for the hell of it.'

With unwearied high spirits he pulled on the reins, making his barely tame pony rear and prance.

Dionysus was no god for timid, law-abiding people. He is an outsider, from the ungovernable spaces of Thrace and Phrygia. Always, wild music leads him on and peaceful, rational folk turn their eyes from this carnival. Even his birth was a raw act. Zeus desired the mortal Semele, daughter of Cadmus. It was a familiar case. Zeus strove to possess the girl, and Hera worked to prevent it. The Queen of Heaven came to Semele in disguise, when the girl was already pregnant.

'O most happy girl, to lie with such an exalted lover!' Then Hera sighed: 'But how can you be sure it's not just a cruel game? He'll have his pleasure and toss you away like the shell of a nut. Test his love. Let him come to you in all his glory, as he would to a lawful wife, for it's a poor thing to be a god's whore.'

So Semele nagged her lover until, in a moment of aggravation, he gave way. But no human body can withstand the divine blaze of Zeus in all his majesty, and Semele was burnt to ashes. Zeus grabbed the baby from her womb, a child already made immortal by contact with the holy fire, and thrust it into a gash in his thigh, to await the full term. When the time came, the infant Dionysus was born from his father's thigh.

Lacking a mother, Dionysus was nursed by Ino, Semele's sister. But Hera was not finished with the family. She sent madness to afflict both Ino and her husband, Athamas, so that he shot his elder son in mistake for a deer. Then pursued by mad Athamas, mad Ino jumped, with her other son in her arms, from the Molurian Rocks into the Saronic Gulf. Dionysus escaped to Mount Nysa where the nymphs of the rain and

the mountain cared for him. In this seclusion, except for his tutor Silenus, his companions were women. He even dressed as a woman.

Silenus was cunning and dissolute, pot-bellied, bald-headed, and with horse's ears. He taught Dionysus the elements of self-indulgence and disorder. The wisdom of Silenus was not worth a pin. Once, wishing to test him, King Midas of Phrygia captured Silenus, loosened his tongue with wine and demanded to know the secret of life.

'It is best for man not to be born,' Silenus answered, 'and the next best thing is to die young.'

Was the discovery of wine by Dionysus, in which Silenus undoubtedly had a hand, only an antidote to despair?

'Despair, who talks of despair?' cried the young horseman, side-stepping his mount, wild-eyed and foam-flecked, into the throng of travellers. 'Dionysus is our friend.' His excited face beamed around, challenging opposition. 'He is the great benefactor of mankind. All hail to Dionysus! If you can't handle the divine gift of wine, it's no fault of the god. That's a human failing. There's a story about that. Young Dionysus sat on a stone to rest, on his way to Naxos. It was summer, of course. At his feet he saw a little plant, a vine, which seemed to him so beautiful he wanted to take it with him. To keep it from the heat of the sun he put it in the thigh-bone of a bird. As he went along, the plant grew so quickly that it needed more protection. So he put the bird's bone into a lion's bone, and then that into the bone of an ass. And so he came to Naxos. But when he went to plant the little vine he found bones and roots so entangled that he put the whole lot into the ground. The plant grew, and prospered, and bore good red grapes, which Dionysus made into wine and gave to mankind to drink for the first time. Now this is what happened. When people drank a little, they sang like birds; when they drank more, they were as strong as lions; but when they drank too much, they acted like asses.'

'That's Dionysus for you,' put in a carter who had been testing a new flute with a few dreamy notes. 'Who know's what he'll do next? He's got a surprise for everyone, as those Tyrrhenian pirates found when they captured him on Chios, or perhaps it was in Icaria. They discovered they'd bitten off more than they could chew. He looked so drowsy and befuddled and handsome they thought, "Ah, this fellow will sell well in the slave market". Only the helmsman had a suspicion that they might be dealing with a god. But the rest of the crew wouldn't listen. They forced Dionysus on board and sailed away. But the wind dropped as if by magic. The oars became serpents, a vine wound around the mast, and clusters of grapes hung over the head of the strange youth. Wine seeped up through the deck. Then, suddenly, savage beasts were growling and licking their lips, so that the pirates

abandoned ship. As they dived overboard they turned into dolphins. And that's why dolphins are now always kind to sailors. They don't want the god to punish them again.'

Dionysus makes people change. He gets under the skin. Respectable citizens become wild, irrational, a puzzle even to themselves. For a time, they do not know who they are. His weapons are wine and madness.

Where and how was wine invented? That is the secret of the god. Certain hard-drinking places, like Naxos or Chios, like to claim the distinction of the first vineyard. But Dionysus brought wine with him from Thrace, and crafty old Silenus, his tutor, had something to do with the discovery, on Mount Nysa. All at once the mountain nymphs, who had been so shy that they hid their faces behind winnowing-fans, were transformed into raging Maenads, the female rabble who attended Dionysus wherever he went. They wound snakes around their arms and frightened the country peace with bull-roarers. They brandished the *thyrsus* – a strong staff twined with ivy and topped by a pine cone. With this, they beat all who stood in their way. It was a symbol of office, but also a cruel weapon. These women were possessed, carried away by wine and hypnotized by incessant rhythms of the bacchanal dance.

In truth, they were frenzied, sharing in a madness which Hera imposed on the adult Dionysus, as the last act in her revenge against Semele.

In a whirl of dervishes, Dionysus fled through many lands. Vines grew out of his footsteps as he passed, and the people propagated them and turned the grapes into wine. But no one knew what else Dionysus might leave behind. Sometimes it was wonder and sometimes horror, and sometimes the wonder turned to horror. When King Midas – he to whom Apollo had given asses' ears – helped Dionysus through Phrygia and asked for a golden touch in return, the god granted the request. But then even his clothes, even his last crumb of food, turned to gold, and the King was on the point of starvation. Only the River Pactolus could release him from this fatal gift. The stream washed the golden touch into the riverbed, which gleams to this day with gold sands.

As Dionysus moved on, wild rumours and whispers attended his progress. By the Nile, he founded the oracle of Egyptian Ammon. He defeated Titans in Libya. He fought for, and then against, Amazons. On his way to India he flayed a king in Syria. He crossed one great river on a bridge of vines twisted with ivy, and another on the back of a tiger. He tamed elephants in India and drove them back, or so some say, for their bones to lie in Greek earth.

In time, Dionysus' term of madness was at an end. Rhea, mother of

Zeus, purified him, and then showed him the mysteries of the Great Mother. He was ready to return to the lands where the gods make their home.

But those lands, already owing duty and worship to older gods, were reluctant to receive him. He harried the opposition, giving no mercy. In his wake he left riot, disorder, bloodshed.

‘That drug he had with him, that wine,’ the merchant lamented, ‘was too powerful for simple mouths, unused to the divine liquid.’

The merchant eyed his fellow travellers with care. Windswept, sun-baked, dragging an effusion of sweat and animal ordure, they seemed familiar enough with the holy wine.

He continued with less confidence, not quite sure of his effect on this crowd: ‘Just look what happened, even in the god’s own land of Thrace. King Lycurgus attacked Dionysus and his wild women with an ox-goad, forcing the god to dive in the sea and take shelter with Thetis. So Dionysus made the king mad. He took an axe to his own son, thinking the boy was a vine, and pruned off his limbs. Then a barrenness settled on the earth that could only be relieved by the sacrifice of the king. His own subjects tore him apart with wild horses.’

The young rider on the prancing horse laughed. ‘That’s right,’ he shouted. ‘There are no milksops in our part of the world. Rough justice for a rough people. Life for a life.’

‘No,’ the merchant protested, ‘this is a question of danger, not of justice. Justice, whatever it is, is rational. But who can calculate the effects of frenzy? Listen, this is what happened in Thebes, in the city of Semele, Dionysus’ own mother. King Pentheus feared the look of the Dionysian rabble at the gates of the city. He had the god thrown into prison and the Maenads driven out to Mount Cithaeron. But the doors of the prison flew open and Dionysus walked free. Then he took Pentheus aside and whispered in his ear, inviting him to witness strange erotic scenes on Cithaeron. What did the king see?’

‘At dawn, a company of women arose, old, young, matrons, mothers, girls, all jumbled together. Dishevelled hair hung to their shoulders. They wore skins bound with snakes, which licked their cheeks. In their hair were tangles of ivy, oak leaf, briony. Some, with full breasts, suckled fawns or wolf-cubs. One struck a rock with her *thyrsus* and made water spout. Another dug a hollow in which a pool of milk formed. Another jabbed the ground and a fountain of wine gushed out. Honey dripped from the tips of the ivy-clad staffs. From the mountain, they swept down on the cattle pastures. A full-uddered cow was pulled apart and a calf ripped to pieces. Bones and flesh were trampled into the ground, blood-spotted tatters of skin hung on the branches of the pines. Countless female hands dragged a bull to its

knees, and before you could blink the flesh was stripped from it.

‘Then, like birds of prey, they swooped onto the rich plains of Asopus, where farmers live in peace and contentment. In a moment, the villagers were engulfed by senseless fury. Nothing harmed the wild women, fire did not burn them, nor weapons touch them. But they, thrusting and battering with their *thyrsus* staffs, broke many a head and spilled many a gut, until the villagers were put to flight. Then the Maenads returned to the top of Cithaeron in triumph, their bare shoulders weighted with looted babies. They washed in the springs that Dionysus had caused to flow, and the snakes licked the bloodstains from their faces.

‘King Pentheus spied all this and quaked. Some god-demon, he thought, has done this. He has sent these women the mind-corrupting grape, the vine that loosens conscience. Even as he thought this, a gust of wind revealed his hiding place, and the frenzied women were on him in a flash. Like the calf, like the bull, he was ripped asunder with bare hands, and it is said that his own mother, Agave, tore off his head.’

What defence has mankind against the superhuman powers of god-sent dementia? In Attica, Icarius welcomed Dionysus, planted his grapes, fermented wine, and gave it to the people to drink. But becoming drunk, they thought they had been poisoned and killed Icarius. When his daughter, Erigone, having searched everywhere with her faithful dog, found the body, she hanged herself in grief.

Even worse things happened in Orchomenus. The three daughters of King Minyas refused to join in the Dionysian debauchery. They stayed in the palace, quietly weaving, even when Dionysus came in disguise and pressed them to take part. In anger, the god then tormented them with phantasms and weird sounds. Vines grew into the cloth on the loom, and wild animals stalked the room until the girls were driven mad. After casting lots, they tore the son of the eldest, Leucippe, to pieces, as a sacrifice to Dionysus. But he was not appeased. He banished them from mankind, changing them into a bat, an owl and a crow.

No land could hold out against Dionysus. Everywhere he went, fury and ecstasy overwhelmed the people, and they bowed down before the new god. Even the gods acknowledged his divine force. On Olympus, Zeus introduced his wild son into the pantheon of heaven. Then Dionysus plunged through Lake Lerna, to rescue his mother, Semele, from the black wastes of the Underworld. He instated her modestly on the fringes of the divine court, where not even Hera objected to her presence.

Out of the drums and the keening of flutes and shawms, out of waves of nausea and passion, out of the fury of the ritual dance, out of the heavy pulse of the and Dionysus from the lands of the north.

Could ecstasy be purged of violence and cruelty, so that the inner voice might be heard without pain, and the doors of perception swing peacefully open? Dionysus and Demeter, it seemed, were far apart. But in the world of visions their paths crossed at least once. This is how it happened. On her way to Eleusis, searching for her daughter, Demeter had met in the road a woman called Baubo. She offered the goddess some barley water but Demeter was preoccupied by grief and did not drink it. Then Baubo lifted her skirts and showed her womb, in which Demeter saw the child Iacchus. The baby was gurgling and smiling and seemed so happy that Demeter laughed too. Then her grief was lifted and she took the drink gratefully. Iacchus was Dionysus in another form, and because he had consoled Demeter he was ever after woven into the secret web of the Eleusinian Mysteries of the goddess.

One miracle was accounted to Iacchus, the hidden Dionysus. When the Persian armies of Xerxes were laying waste the plain before Athens, some Greeks who were with the Persians saw a tower of dust, as much as thirty thousand soldiers would make, rising over Eleusis. The cloud moved over the war-torn land towards Salamis, where the ships of the Greeks waited. Then there came from the dust a swelling sound, the solemn music of the hymn sung to Iacchus in the practice of the Mysteries. The Greeks knew then that the Persians were doomed.

One ecstatic follower of Dionysus pondered the connection with holy and gentle Demeter. He set out to illuminate the visionary world, to divide the Dionysian frenzy from the mystical Dionysus.

To the singer Orpheus, the world was not what it seems. There is another story of primal beings even beyond the Olympian gods. Orpheus sang of these things. First, only Chaos and Darkness existed, out of whom the goddess Night emerged, spreading her wings like a monstrous black bird. The Wind fertilized her and she gave birth to Eros, enclosed in a silver egg. Eros was also called Phanes, the Revealed One, a god who was both sexes, a woman before and a man behind, with four eyes and four horns and golden wings. With his mother, Night, he lived in a deep cave, for none could face his radiance, and for this reason Night called him 'the First-born Shining One'. Then Eros-Phanes made earth and sky and moon, with the sun to watch over them, and he set Rhea, the Great Mother, in front of the

cave to beat a bronze drum, as a warning of the divinity within. Eros-Phanes governed the reins of the universe, which he passed on in his own good time to Uranus, and thence to Cronus and Zeus as the poets have related. But Orpheus and his mystical followers believed that the time of Zeus will pass, and then Dionysus will bring in a new age of faith in which all perplexities are resolved.

On the road from Meteora, the caravan of the travellers had settled into the steady rhythm of experienced wanderers. The sun was losing heat, arcing towards the western horizon. The drovers gave an occasional whistle, or a half-hearted crack of the whip, but the animals plodded on as if mesmerized. The carter had his new flute tuned now. Confidently, he began a melody that nearly everyone recognized. Then a singer added the words of the ode, in praise of music.

‘Golden lyre, gift of Apollo and the bright-haired Muses,
The dancers hear you and the dance begins.
First, the prelude, then singers join the trembling strings.
Music quenches the thunderbolts of ever-flowing fire.
With folded wings, the eagle sleeps on Zeus’ sceptre.
Enchantment seals its eyelids,
Its supple back rises and falls,
To the spell of your sweet sounds.
The War God drops his spear and his brutal heart is quiet.
Taught by Leto’s son and the rich-breasted Muses,
The power of music lays even gods to rest.’

Listening to the noble ode, Mantes thought about Orpheus. He was mortal, after all. Apart from being the greatest poet and musician who ever lived, how did Orpheus differ from his countrymen, the untamed and much-feared warriors of Thrace and Phrygia? They, too, were musicians, lovers of songs and dance, followers of Dionysus. Travelling with the men from those lands, Mantes considered his own group on the road. In the day, they endured with stoical strength whatever nature and the gods might throw at them. At night, they took out wine flasks and panpipes and flutes and serenaded the stars until tears of passion or sadness flowed. And then, in contentment, they pulled horse-cloth or sheepskin over their heads and slept.

But Orpheus, like Demeter, went through the refining fire of suffering.

Orpheus was the son of King Oeagrus of Thrace and the Muse Calliope. Taught by his mother and her sister Muses, he understood the arts of poetry and music as no mortal had ever done. Both men and beasts crept close to hear him play, and the trees bent down to him, and the rocks wept, and rivers stopped flowing to hear him. Apollo himself, God of Music, was touched and gave Orpheus one of

his own lyres, in recognition of an almost divine skill. Orpheus thanked the god humbly, but in his heart he worshipped Dionysus, the god of his homeland.

Orpheus loved the wood-nymph Eurydice, and she loved him tenderly in return. But Aristaeus, a minor deity who looked after bee-keeping and the olive groves, lusted after Eurydice and tried to rape her in the vale of Tempe. Eurydice fled but in her flight she trod on a snake, which struck out and killed her. Her shade went down to the realm of Hades, leaving Orpheus in despair. He made up his mind to bring her back. With nothing but his lyre and his songs to help him he went to Taenarum in Laconia, where a cleft in the earth leads down to the Underworld.

On the banks of the Styx, Orpheus began to play. Charon, the grim ferryman, heard him, and, forgetting both duty and payment, carried him to the far bank where even Cerberus, the three-headed watch-dog, was lulled by soft sounds to sleep. Orpheus passed the Judges of the Dead, in the Fields of Asphodel, and came to Tartarus, to the court of Hades. When he had listened to the playing of Orpheus, and heard his request, the God of the Underworld made one concession, which was all his icy heart allowed, in recognition of the power of music. Eurydice could return to the land of the living on one condition: Orpheus must not look back at her until they reached the surface of the world.

They set out, through many terraces of pain and darkness. Eurydice followed the sound of the lyre and Orpheus was reassured by the slight rustle of her soft footfall. But as they approached the sunlit world he was no longer sure. Had she lost the way? Where was she? He turned to look back and caught her last agonized glance before Hades plucked her beyond the reach of his arms. The gates of Tartarus closed on her forever.

Bereft of love, Orpheus abandoned hope. His lyre fell from his hands and was taken by the gods into the night sky, as the constellation Lyra. In his despair, he was finished with women. Some say he turned to the love of men, the first among humans to do so; others say he became a celibate priest of Apollo. In any case, he no longer took pleasure in the orgies of Dionysus, and for this the Maenads could not forgive him. Once, when they were mad and heated, they came upon Orpheus in his wanderings. They wanted to correct him, to punish him, to repossess him. Each Maenad grabbed at him with lust and fury until, as had happened to so many others, he was torn apart. When they saw what they had done, the women of Dionysus tossed his head into the River Hebrus. But they could not stop the head from singing. Still singing, it was washed to the sea and came to rest at last on the island of Lesbos.

As the severed head drifted past many lands, nothing could stop it singing. It celebrated a mystery that no Maenad could destroy: it sang of the eternal power of music. As the head floated by, people in many lands heard it, at first with wonder, and then giving thanks from the heart. Out of the divine terror of the Dionysian rout, Orpheus brought them a new solace, the indescribable consolation of music.

Steadily poised above the slow-swaying rump of his horse, the lax flowing measures of an ancient dance. As he listened, Mantes was at peace, released for a little moment from the tension and struggle of daily living. He looked around. A mellow evening light lay on the empty land, and the uncouth northern faces softened with respect and gratitude.

Part Two

HEROES IN THE LANDS OF THE GODS



Boatmen

LIFE AND DEATH

The world is the gift of Ge, our Mother Earth. She created it, and made all things ready, before the coming of gods and men. To each, a part was apportioned. High on Olympus, a heavenly place was prepared for the gods. Above mist and cloud, where human eye can penetrate no farther, is a realm of divine peace. No storms shake those sunlit peaks. The Four Winds of the world, feared by the gods for their unpredictable and limitless bluster, are safely caged below, on the floating island of Lipara. Aeolus is their keeper. Seated within the Cave of the Winds, he releases his charges from the hollow island, one by one, through a hole in the cliff. Above, in unblemished days, under golden palace roofs, the gods of Olympus feast and keep council, directing the affairs of man and nature. Their food, unfit for human mouths, is nectar and ambrosia. Instead of blood, the divine ichor runs in their veins. They are immortal.

Then there is the other race called human. In shape, these beings are like the gods. In desire, in intelligence, in feeling, they show their godlike qualities. But they live in a world of many trials, amid drought and cataract, dogged by grief and pain, and Death takes them in the end.

‘We are tragic godlings,’ Mantes often thought, as he sang the unfolding destinies of gods and heroes. ‘We reach for divinity and fail.’

Both gods and humans are the children of Earth. In the world, first there was stone, or clay, or water – things of the Earth – and then suddenly there was man. How did it come about? From the time of memory, Ge was accompanied by certain youthful bands – the Cabiri, the Dactyls, the Curetes. Spirits or men, they came from Earth. Blood or semen, spilt on the ground in the course of divine struggle, opened the womb of our Mother. Once, the Sun-god, flying his chariot high above Phrygia, saw the Corybantes growing like trees out of the land beneath. In another place, under the ash trees, the Melioi men dropped to the ground like fruit.

Many lands claimed the honour of Earth’s first human progeny. In his travels, Mantes heard many tales. The Boeotians boasted: The

Titan Prometheus took our clay, which Ge provided, and moulded it to human form. Pallas Athene breathed into the form and it came alive. Look here, at Panopea, here are the clay shards left over from that first man.'

But other Boeotians disagreed: 'Everyone knows that our ancestor Alalcomeneus was the first man. He came out of the water, rising like a seal from Lake Copais.'

In Arcadia, they spoke of Pelasgus, their earth-born man, who taught his descendants to eat acorns, make huts of branches and wear a covering of skins such as simple folk still wear. Arcadia eventually had many people, but the island of Aegina gave birth to Aeacus only. He lived in lonely state until Zeus pitied him and turned the ants of the island into men called Myrmidons. Then Lemnos, or so it is said, brought forth Cabirus; Dysaulus grew from the Rharian Fields of Eleusis, and Alcyoneus, first of the giant people, sprang from the ground of Pallene.

'It was not enough for Mother Earth,' an Athenian told Mantes, 'that animals and mere vegetables should possess the world. She made man out of her earthy body so that she could see intelligence at work, and feel the devotion of such beings. Of course, she chose to begin in Attica. Our Attic earth was pure and fertile ground for the generation of such a being, who would surpass all others in reason and give due worship to the gods. Cecrops was the first being of this kind, mortal but not yet wholly human, a man above but a serpent below the waist.'

But that claim got black looks from the people of Argos. Phoroneus was their first man, who had come to land out of the conjunction of the river and the sea. When Prometheus stole fire from the gods, Phoroneus taught the Argives how to use this gift. Armed with holy fire, they claimed to be the first people to emerge from the savage world of beasts.

It amused Mantes to hear all these old tales. Man, whatever he was, certainly had in his nature the wish to be first, and the need to be important.

But in all these histories there was one point of agreement. Prometheus, son of the Titan Iapetus, was the friend and champion of mankind. Prometheus, whose name means Forethought, was no enemy of the Olympian gods. During the War of the Gods, in which his brothers Atlas and Menoetius fought and suffered, Prometheus supported Zeus, because he knew the Thunderer's ultimate victory. The Titan could read the book of the Fates, but that was dangerous knowledge. He knew the secret Zeus most wished to hear: the goddess on whom, if they mated, Zeus would father a son greater than himself. So Zeus feared and distrusted Prometheus, and his suspicion grew to

hatred when he saw that Prometheus was the protector of mankind. This new race was growing too proud. Humans began to set themselves against the will of heaven. They even dared to question the division of the sacrificial animals offered on the altars of the gods.

To test the case, gods and men came to Mecone and put the dispute to wise Prometheus to decide. Now Prometheus, who was secretly on the side of man, devised a trick. When he slaughtered the ox, and divided it, he hid the good meat in the bag of the belly but wrapped the skin and bones in a tempting package of fat. Then he offered the portions to Zeus. Either out of greed or in a desire to incriminate Prometheus, Zeus chose the package of fat. The choice was made. Ever after, in the sacrifice, mankind took the meat and the gods took the bones.

It is not wise to mock the gods. As for Prometheus, his punishment could wait. Zeus had plans for his suffering. But in the meantime, there was mankind. In his rage, Zeus withheld fire from the world. Men might have meat but they would eat it raw. But again Prometheus frustrated the will of Zeus. He climbed to Olympus and stole the heavenly fire, though no one saw him do it. Some say he took a live coal from Hephaestus' forge, others that he lit a torch from the flames of the Sun. Then he hid the fire in a fennel-stalk and took it down to man.

The moment of triumph is a moment of danger. Assisted by fire, man began to bind the forces of nature to his command, giving the race of humans a power that was almost divine. But when Zeus looked down and saw the lands below sparkling with useful flames, he felt a renewed fury and determined to send another test, to complete the life of man or to undo him. He would send a partner, an equivocal being in whom the gods placed both comfort and delusion.

Until this time men had existed without women. They came from Earth and lived on her bounty, without work, taking freely the produce of land and sea. Now Zeus ordered Hephaestus, the divine craftsman, to make a clay figure in the form of an Olympian goddess. Athene breathed life into the figure, Aphrodite gave it beauty, Hermes taught it cunning, the Graces and the Hours showed it the pathos and the wiles of womanhood. The figure walked forth, a living being called Pandora, whose name means All Gifts. This was the first woman. Hermes took her by the hand to the world below and presented her to Epimetheus, brother of Prometheus and the most unsuspecting of beings. Prometheus had warned his simple brother to beware gifts from the gods. But Epimetheus thought, 'What harm is there in beauty?' He gladly received Pandora into his household.

The gods had given Pandora beauty and grace. They had also given her a large earthenware jar packed with afflictions as yet unknown in

the world. Disease and evil and cruelty and suffering were in the jar, and also old age and toil and hunger and weariness. The jar was sealed, but who can keep a secret from idle curiosity? Pandora was foolish and Epimetheus dull and without guile. Zeus had foreseen the inevitable result. All at once the jar was lying open and mischief was abroad in the world. Only Hope remained in the jar, caught under the rim, the one consolation left to mankind for the loss of innocence.

In his wanderings, many times Mantes had told this solemn history of man, in banqueting halls or sitting among the people in the agora.

‘A curse on Prometheus,’ a voice would cry. ‘It is rash at all times to go against the gods. But to deceive the Thunderer twice! To cheat him of sacrifice, and then to steal fire! Prometheus did it for us, but why should we thank him? It was pride, it was sin. From these benefits come woe.’

All benefits have a double face, Mantes thought. Bad goes with good. Mankind has a choice but chooses blindly. The consequences are hidden. The Fates alone know the future. What can poet or prophet do except unfold for men and women the story of their own mortality?

‘Listen,’ he would say then, holding up his hand to still the protests. ‘We cannot escape our history. We are fallen beings. In the Age of Gold, Cronus, father of Zeus, ruled the universe. Then men lived like gods, free from sorrow and toil, accepting the harvest of nature. After a time, they were gathered into heaven, as if into sleep, and their spirits became the guardians of the next generation. But this age passed and a new Age of Silver began, when Zeus, the son of Cronus, ruled the heavens. Men were not what they were before. In this age, people hardly developed beyond infancy, hiding in their mothers’ skirts for a hundred years, then stumbling still immature to death. The altars were empty, the gods waited in vain for offerings. In disgust, Zeus swept this miserable race into the bowels of the Underworld, to become the spirits of the dead.

‘Then, in the Age of Bronze, another race of men sprang up from the ash trees. Strong and fierce, they ate meat not bread, and bound themselves to Ares, God of War. In bronze armour, with bronze arms, they fought each other to extinction, and black Death carried them down to the cold hall of Hades. They disappeared and made way for a better race, the men like demi-gods of the Heroic Age. These fought and died by the seven gates of Thebes, in the land of Cadmus, and took ships to Troy and perished nobly in the dust of the plain. To some of these, in recognition of their courage and glory, Zeus gave a life after death, in the Elysium of the Blessed Isles, in a land of peace and plenty still under the kindly rule of Cronus.

‘Finally, in the Age of Iron, came the people of the present, a time

we know too well, full of wickedness and grief. Nor is the trial of mankind at an end, for things grow worse. Surely we shall see the time when degenerate babes will be born with a foot in the grave, with senile wrinkles and heads of white hair. Then oaths will mean nothing – we move towards it now! – might shall be right, and each man shall raise his hand against his neighbour. Then, when mankind is utterly abandoned, when the last good spirit retreats to heaven, when Reverence is shamed and even Indignation silenced, then Zeus will bring the inglorious human experiment to an end.’

‘It is the fault of Prometheus,’ the voices cried once more. ‘He set us against the gods. He is the false prophet. He gave us meat we could not stomach. Let him suffer.’

Prometheus did not escape the revenge that Zeus had planned for him. Hephaestus summoned the Titans Bia and Cratus, whose names mean Force and Strength, and together they captured Prometheus and bound him fast to a mountain peak in Caucasus, far from the homes of men. Daily, Zeus sent an eagle to tear out his liver, and each night the liver grew again. His suffering was timeless, for Prometheus could not die. One thing sustained him against his tormentor. He alone knew the name of the goddess who was a danger to Zeus. And so for countless years the two opponents remained in tension, the Titan in agony, the Father of the Gods in unforgiving suspense. At last, an exchange was agreed. Heracles, travelling through Caucasus in pursuit of mighty deeds, was permitted to shoot the eagle and set Prometheus free. In return, Zeus was warned not to lie with Thetis, daughter of Nereus, lest he father a son greater than himself.

But the punishment of Prometheus did nothing to exonerate mankind. In all the years of his pain, men did not lose their insolence, and they discovered new ways to offend the gods.

In the Age of Bronze, when the world had fallen into a chaos of war and cruelty, Lycaon of Arcadia sacrificed a boy on the altar of Zeus. And when Zeus himself came in disguise to investigate this impiety, he was given at the sacrificial feast the guts of a youth mixed with the offal of sheep. Zeus was not deceived. He dashed the pot from the table and turned the family of Lycaon into wolves. Then he reflected further. Mankind had become irredeemably evil. Zeus resolved to destroy these loathsome beings in a great flood.

But Prometheus, whose foreknowledge still did not desert him, even with his agony on the Caucasian rock, sent a passing bird to warn his son Deucalion. ‘Build an ark,’ was the message, ‘and go aboard with your wife Pyrrha, daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora, and wait there for the rising of the water.’ Then Zeus opened the floodgates of heaven. Notus, the South Wind, roared, the waters piled up, overwhelming the lands and their peoples. Only a few fortunate ones

escaped the deluge. Cerambus of Pelion turned into a scarab beetle and flew away. Megarus, founder of Megara, was led to the safe heights of Mount Gerania by the eerie calls of high-flying cranes. Dardanus, later prince of Troy, launched a boat of skins from Samothrace and drifted to the eastern shore as the swelling waters of the flood pushed Europe and Asia apart. These few survived. The little ark of Deucalion floated above the rest, over a waste of water and a drowned people.

After nine days the flood subsided and the ark came to rest on a mountain peak. It was Parnassus, or Aetna, or Othrys, or Athos – no one is sure. With thanks-givings Deucalion and Pyrrha stepped on the ground. But what a world! All around a woebegone land, drenched and seaweed draped, the houses silent, the altars cold. At once, Deucalion and Pyrrha made sacrifice to Zeus, in gratitude for safe delivery. Then they prayed to Themis, at her empty shrine by the River Cephissus, begging her to intercede with Zeus for the renewal of the human race. Zeus was touched. If one man and one woman were capable of such unforced humility and devotion, then there was something in mankind worth saving. Through the mouth of Themis, Zeus gave direction for renewal.

‘Cover your heads in penitence,’ she ordered Deucalion and his wife, ‘and throw over your shoulders the bones of your Mother Earth.’

So they took Earth’s bones, which are the rocks and the stones, and threw them over their shoulders. Deucalion’s stones became men, and those thrown by Pyrrha grew into women. First of the new race, Deucalion and his wife went to Locris where Pyrrha gave birth to Hellen, a leader of men, destined to be father of all Greeks.

All-Seeing Zeus had ordained a fresh beginning. From the loins of Hellen came a new race of humans. They were people like lions, with spirits forged in iron, standing against the world as tall as trees. They honoured the gods and relit the sacrificial fires.

For a time all was well. The shameful Bronze Age passed, the Age of Heroes had begun. But in this world neither respect nor worship last, for man is always man, his own worst enemy.

But Mantes knew very well that heroes were not gods, however like in beauty, intelligence and energy. ‘We cannot avoid our mortality,’ he thought. Thanatos, black-clad Death, closes all human eyes. Life twists and turns but leads both Achilles and the beggar to the kingdom of Hades. The shades of the dead let go of the world. Let them be buried well, for without a coat of earth or dust the Lord of the Underworld will not accept them. Pay Charon, the ferryman, with a coin beneath the tongue. Then Hermes will take them from the

grave for the last journey. The facts of life are these: birth, and procreation, and death.'

Many hidden and dangerous paths led down to the Underworld – a cleft in a rock, a sombre valley, a ravine from which hot vapours swirl – at Aornum, or Taenarum, or by Lake Lerna. But the ordinary shades depart by one broad road, from the land of the Cimmerians, where the Styx and its four dread tributaries mark out the upper boundary of the Realm of the Dead. Acheron, Phlegethon, Cocytus and Lethe – the Rivers of Grief, of Fire, of Lamentation and of Forgetfulness – run into the Styx, the River of Hate. And here, at this border post of life, stands the Oracle of the Dead.

'It is the duty of the poet,' Mantes reminded himself, 'to find the truth about the gods. We must follow wherever they lead, even to the edge of the afterlife.'

In the spirit of enquiry he journeyed north to consult the priest of the Oracle on the banks of the dark river. Leaving Thesprotia, he entered a land of gloom, for Helios did not come this way but drove the sun's chariot far to the south. Mantes stumbled through a wild country. Zephyrus, the West Wind, came rushing from the nearby stream of Oceanus. The wind battered the hills and tugged at the scant vegetation, shaking rain on the chill ground in which few things grew. The land, raw and bitter, looked spent, like a life near its end. Gaunt bones pushed at the bare and weathered skin.

The people of this land, the Cimmerians, lived with Death as a neighbour. Charon tethered his boat at the foot of the mountain. To these people, Charon and Death were indistinguishable – the servants of Hades. They collected souls. Their shadows, huge and suffocating, hung over all lives. On his journey, in a hut barely lit by a guttering rush-candle, Mantes heard an old woman lay out a corpse. As she rubbed the body with herb-scented oil she harried Charon with a thin protesting wail:

'Why are the mountains dark, and why so sad?

Is it the wind at war, or does the rain-storm scourge them?

It is not the wind at war, it is not the rain that scourges,

It is only Charon passing, passing through with the dead.

He drives the youths before him, and drags the old behind,

And tender babes hang from his saddle-bow in a line.'

Beyond the mountain pass, in the heavy plain, Mantes saw dull waters, grey as lead. Where Acheron and Cocytus flowed into the Styx, he saw Acherusia, the Lake of the Dead. Where did it end? The low, treacherous shore petered out into ghost-haunted marshlands. On the bank, beneath a tall white rock, stood the grove of willow and poplar sacred to Persephone, Queen of the Dead. This was the point of departure. Below in the palace of Erebus, in the palace of black halls,

Hades waited.

‘He reaps his harvest, which is never short,’ sighed the priest of the Oracle, standing with Mantes in Persephone’s grove. ‘Hades is ever anxious for souls.’

Plucked from the grave by Hermes’ guiding hand, shades of the dead began the voyage below. With muffled oar-strokes the ferryman glided slowly from the bank of life to the shore of death where Cerberus, the triple-headed hound, kept guard, to see that none returned. Then the road led down to the Fields of Asphodel, where shades of no distinction dwindled out eternity, existing so close to nothingness that the meanest penury on earth seemed kingly in comparison. Here the dead came to justice and accounted for their lives before the three Judges of the Dead. Aeacus judged Europe, Rhadamanthys judged Asia, and stern Minos was arbiter of doubtful cases. Most shades, too ordinary for special praise or blame, went no farther, destined to rest uneasy in the Fields of Asphodel. A few passed on. For heroes, Zeus had decreed the place called Elysium, or the Isle of the Blessed, a land set apart from Tartarus, bathed by Oceanus. There, under the rule of Cronus, in a perpetual summer, those who had dared and accomplished much contemplated the memory of their great deeds, in an afterlife without toil or pain or worry. But the wicked were condemned to the deep prison of Tartarus, a pit of torment enclosed in metal walls.

‘Such punishments,’ said the priest in a voice of awe, ‘for those who set their hands against the gods! Our own spirits tremble at the thought. Think of Ixion and Tityus, who tried to force themselves on holy goddesses. Remember Tantalus and Sisyphus, whose deceit and trickery enraged the gods.’

Drunken Ixion tried to ravish the Queen of Heaven herself. But Zeus sent a pillar of cloud in the shape of his wife and caught Ixion copulating with air. The Father of the Gods threw him down to Tartarus, to revolve forever on a wheel of fire. Next to him in Tartarus lay Tityus, pegged to the ground. He had tried to force himself on Leto, mother of the holy twins Artemis and Apollo. Two vultures plucked at his liver, rooting in the cavity of his body for all eternity.

Simple justice for simple villains. But Tantalus, once the darling of Olympus, won his terrible fate for betraying the confidence of the gods. He, who had once eaten at the divine banquets, stole the sacred nectar and ambrosia and peddled abroad the divine table-talk. He stole the golden dog that had watched over the infancy of Zeus and hid it on Mount Sipylus. Then, most awful, either in madness or thinking himself divine, Tantalus fed the gods a dish of human flesh made from Pelops, his own butchered son. For this, he went to Tartarus, fixed in an infernal lake. Cool water lapped his chin and the

laden boughs of fruit trees grazed his head. Yet he could not rid himself of thirst and hunger. When he dipped his head to drink, the water retreated to a black hole. When he reached for fruit, the wind tore it away.

Who would shed tears for such a wretch? Sisyphus of Corinth deserved some sympathy perhaps. But the gods are implacable. Unlucky Sisyphus fell between Zeus and his love. Amorous Zeus had hidden the nymph Aegina, and her angry father, the river-god Asopus, could not find her. But Sisyphus, who was as clever as he was rash, knew the hiding place. In return for a spring of good water in Corinth, Sisyphus told Asopus where to go. The rough river-god, who was no respecter of the Olympians, set out after the lovers and Zeus had to turn himself into a stone to avoid him.

Then Zeus visited his wrath on Sisyphus. He ordered Hades to seize him and drag him to Tartarus in chains. But wily Sisyphus persuaded Hades to test the chains himself, and when the god did so Sisyphus snapped the locks shut. In consternation, Ares rushed to release Hades, for war is friend to death, and the bodies of the slain were piling up on earth. Once more Hades grabbed Sisyphus but the Corinthian had another trick to try. He whispered to his wife to leave his corpse unburied, for none could go to the Underworld without the rites of burial. But Zeus had spoken. What the Fates had in store for Sisyphus could not be deflected forever. In Tartarus, a huge stone awaited, standing at the foot of a steep hill. With straining muscles and heaving breath, Sisyphus strove to push the boulder to the crest. But every time the stone neared the summit, the hill rolled it back again.

Mantes knew that these warnings from the realm of Hades had been brought to Odysseus in the Age of Heroes. Odysseus had stood here also, in Persephone's grove, seeking word from the dead. Circe, the witch, had told him what to do. With his sword he dug a pit, a yard in width and length. Then he poured libations of milk, honey and wine, and sacrificed a ram and a black ewe. He bent their heads down towards Erebus and slit their throats and the dark blood flowed into the pit.

'This was the trench, it happened here,' said the priest of the Oracle, pointing out to Mantes the very spot.

'Yes,' the priest continued, 'the road back from the Underworld is not impossible. Orpheus found it and lost it. Even Cerberus can be bribed with honey cake. Ghosts return, released for a time by Hades, from compassion or sardonic humour. They come to drink the blood, the red liquid of life, which has gone from their bodies and for which they crave.

'Here, look at this place. Here is the outline of the pit. When Odysseus' blade struck, the dark blood flowed and the shades of the

dead flocked upward from the deep. In disordered haste they came, with their agonies still upon them: maidens and young men cut off from love, the suffering old, girls with broken hearts, troops of warriors bearing wounds like open mouths, slain men encased in bloodstained armour. They howled and cried, but what could they do? The red blood had fled from the pale forms. Sinews no longer held flesh and bones together.

‘In the grave, the shade leaves the body as a dream takes wing. The spirits who crowded Odysseus at the trench were as insubstantial as the phantasms of our sleep. They told their news and departed with a sigh. As they left one shade called out – the shade of Lord Achilles himself – “Odysseus, prince of cunning, remember this: I would rather be the least slave to the least of men on earth than lord of all the lifeless throng.” Grim Hades chuckled. The race was run. The gods decreed that only Death was the victor in the end.’



The Contests of Theseus

FOUNDATIONS

The shadows were settling into a quiet doze. All around, eyelids were drooping. Suddenly, at the top of the table, the patriarch stirred and jerked his head upwards.

‘No more about the gods,’ he yawned. ‘We’ve heard those songs to distraction. The town snoozes, the dog lolls under the step to escape the sun, even the flies have stopped dancing in the sunbeam. But chance has set us in your path. Wake us up. Our hearts are generous and we are not without wit. There, beside you, are the things great Homer himself called for when he sang his songs: the table spread with bread and meat, fruit plucked fresh from the tree, the mixing bowl of wine. The steward will fill your cup again. Come, O teller of tales, give us human stuff. Sing of men not gods. What kind of beings are we, a race so mixed and crossed, dark and fair, soldiers and thinkers, merchants and farmers, seafarers and mountain-men, but all speakers of the same tongue? Where did we come from? Sing of our brotherhood, our history of glory and shame, our rage to become everything that man or woman might be. Tell us, I beseech you, who are we?’

The long afternoon stretched away, waiting to be filled, but Mantes wondered where to begin. The question was not easy. To arrive at man, one must start with gods. The storyteller began, as so often, with Zeus in love.

There was a king called Agenor who went from Egypt to Tyre, in the land of Canaan. The blood of the east ran in his veins. Ancient dynasties had bequeathed him power and wisdom. His people combed the ports of the large, landlocked sea. Agenor prospered in Tyre and part of his prosperity lay in his six children. He had five sons, and a daughter named Europa.

Now, Zeus had little business with these lands at the far edge of his dominion. Other gods reigned in those parts, old inscrutable deities, some with the head of a hawk or a cat, all jealous of their offerings and their worship. But occasionally the all-seeing eyes of Zeus ranged

over the far shores. To the south were the burning lands. Helios singed these countries bare, and turned the Ethiopians black in the sun. More distant still, almost unimaginably far, in forests like nightmare, pigmies fought with cranes. But as his eye roved over the land of Tyre, Zeus saw a city rich with trade, good crops in the fields, fat cattle driven out to pasture where the river met the shore and where the women of the palace also came, to bathe in the cool of the day and to play amid the peaceful herds. Europa, flower of all the maidens, went there with her women and Zeus saw her. His eye rested there.

He turned himself into a young bull, white and handsome and with a fine sweep of horns. He blew down his nose, frisking playfully among the herd.

‘Tease me,’ the bull called to the girls, ‘stroke me, garland me. Why bother with lambs and heifers? Am I not beautiful?’

And he kicked his heels, and made a little mock charge, and showed such high spirits that the hearts of the maidens shuddered with apprehension and delight. They collected sprigs of laurel and made garlands of wild flowers and gave them to Europa, to hang about the neck and the horns of the bull.

‘Mount me,’ the bull whispered as she did so, ‘climb on my back. Do not be afraid. I’ll take you on a journey such as you’ve never seen.’

Europa moved like one in a trance, for was it not the voice of Zeus that spoke through the bull’s mouth? She mounted on the broad back and immediately the bull rushed to the sea. Frightened though she was, Europa knew she must cling on. She wound her arms around the muscular neck. The pretty animal was no longer a gentle plaything. The beast had mastered her.

The bull swam west, breasting quiet waves, which did not resist the passage of the god. He swam until he reached the southern shore of Crete. Then he came to land and set the girl down and shook the sea from his coat. The form of the bull had served its purpose and suddenly Europa saw a god standing before her. Zeus led her to a willow grove and possessed her under the trees, where a rill of spring water ran into the bay. In time, she gave birth to three sons: Minos, Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon.

Nothing lasts. Why should a god dally away time with a mere human? It was enough that Zeus had shed greatness on Europa. He had taken her, and blessed her with children, and then he left her. But Europa, though abandoned, had been touched by divinity and her children had some mixture of heaven’s blood in their veins. Asterius, the King of Crete, willingly married Europa and adopted her children, who grew up to be proud and powerful lords. As a test of manhood, they entered into the quarrels of the land, which was a wild, rich place, standing in the trade routes of the world. Many people were

attracted there, many half-related strangers – Pelasgians, Aeolians, Ionians – turbulent tribesmen, adventurers who might grab a patch of scrub and found a kingdom.

War is the ambition of young princes; it is also their game. The island of Crete was too small for the sons of Europa. Very soon, their differences became irreconcilable when they fell out over the good-looking youth Miletus, with whom all three princes were in love. They came seriously to blows, and in this tumult Miletus fled to Caria, on the Asian coast, where he founded a city which bore his name. Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon soon followed him into exile, defeated and driven out by their brother Minos.

The world was a wide place, full of empty spaces waiting to be colonized by restless men. Sarpedon went to the land ruled by his uncle Cilix from Tyre and lived, by the grace of Zeus, three times longer than man's allotted span. He fought and conquered the Milyans and set his seed in the kingdom later called Lycia. Rhadamanthys, when he left Crete, drifted among the islands of the southern Aegean, where he was well received out of honour for his parentage. He began to govern these islands, and he made such good laws and ruled with such justice that Zeus made him a Judge of the Dead in the Underworld when he died.

When Minos had driven out his brothers, he made himself, by force of arms, the heir to Crete. He married Pasiphae, daughter of Helios, and had many children, among them the girls Phaedra and Ariadne. He was a bold and successful warrior, and when Asterius died Minos did not hesitate to claim the throne. But the people muttered.

'This man is not one of us,' they said. 'He is only an adopted son. Why should we obey him?'

'The gods have marked me,' Minos replied with disdain. 'I bask in their smiles. How can you deny me my destiny?'

And to prove his claim, he boasted that whatever he asked of the gods would be granted. At once, this was put to the test. He made ready an altar on the beach and prayed to Poseidon to send an animal worthy to be sacrificed. When he had finished his prayer a powerful white bull swam out of the sea, which the people took to be a sign from heaven, and they accepted Minos as their king. But Minos deceived Poseidon. The white bull was such a large and splendid animal that Minos could not bear to kill it. He added it to his royal herd and substituted an inferior beast for the sacrifice.

Mantes paused. He reflected how the crooked heart of man leads him into conceit and self-delusion.

'Pride is the father of stupidity,' he said with sudden venom. 'He who judges himself greater than his fellows must still learn that he is less than the gods. Minos had begged a favour, then he had broken a

promise. In truth, Crete had seduced him. He wanted it too much. Was it not the place where Zeus was born? He wanted that kingship. He wanted the gold, the trade, the energy of the people, the fury of the warriors. He wanted the bull that came from the sea. His desire overrode his reverence for the gods, and for this he had to be punished.'

When Minos kept the white bull, and did not repay it in sacrifice, Poseidon sent an appropriate punishment. He inflicted Pasiphae with an unnatural lust so that she longed for the bull and wanted to couple with it. She was sick with desire, but how could she accomplish it? The act was not only inhuman, it was also hardly possible. Driven to distraction by the itch of this unmentionable vice, she went in secret to Daedalus, the greatest craftsman and most ingenious inventor in all mankind.

Many years before, Daedalus had been banished from his native Athens. He had killed his nephew in a fit of jealousy because the boy, Perdix, was beginning to challenge the skill of his uncle. Perdix had at a very early age made a potter's wheel and a set of compasses. He invented the first saw, taking as his model the rows of teeth in a crocodile's jaw. But his precocious talent went no further, for his uncle Daedalus seized him and threw him over a cliff. The gods had mercy on the innocent youth and changed his falling body into the partridge which now bears his name. Daedalus was not saved by this transformation. The Athenians arraigned him for murder and took him before the court of the Areopagus, which condemned him to exile. After many journeys Daedalus wandered to Cnossus, in Crete, where he was welcomed by Asterius. He settled and married and had a son called Icarus, and very soon he began to repay his welcome through the extraordinary skill of his hand. A palace of a thousand rooms rose slowly out of his fertile imagination. He planned fortifications and harbours and roads. He made engines of war and strange inventions that did the work of many men. He built painted birds that whistled and sang, and he contrived toys that danced to please the ladies. Daedalus was as valuable to Minos as he had been to Asterius. The great craftsman had the cunning and the talent to give substance to Minos' dreams for his kingdom.

When Queen Pasiphae came to him, with her tale of illicit passion, Daedalus promised to help. To him, it was only one more technical problem, a test for his ingenuity. He constructed a frame in the form of a cow and covered it with a fresh hide so that it looked and smelt right. He arranged that the queen could fit herself in the rear of the beast and stand with her legs thrust into the hollow legs of the cow. Then moving smoothly by means of levers and wheels, the imitation cow, with Pasiphae concealed inside, was taken to the pasture and set

amid the king's herd. In a while, the white bull mounted and Pasiphae had her lust satisfied. Later, when she gave birth to a monster with the body of a man and the head of a bull, Minos went to an oracle for advice. The child-monster, that thing of shame, could not be destroyed, for it was the judgment of Poseidon on the king's impiety. Under the command of the oracle, Minos ordered Daedalus to build a vast, impenetrable maze, or Labyrinth, in which the Minotaur – as the monster was called – could be locked up and hidden from sight.

Minos learnt his lesson. He bowed down before the gods and became a great and just ruler, instituting laws that Zeus himself approved. Crete grew in power and fame. With wise government, strong armies and plentiful trade it began to dominate those lands overlooked by the Holy Ones of Olympus. Every nine years King Minos was called to the summit of Mount Ida, to account to Zeus for the progress of the laws. The Father of the Gods was well satisfied. The country was rich and peaceful. The bronze giant, Talos, constructed for Minos by the divine smith, Hephaestus, guarded the coasts of the island, routing enemy fleets with a barrage of boulders and smothering unlucky invaders in its fiery breast. In old age, Minos could look back on a life lived, for the most part, in accordance with the will of the gods. Heaven forgave him his lapses. And though he died meanly, pursuing an unworthy vengeance against Daedalus, Zeus granted him the recognition of great achievement. In the dark Kingdom of Hades, he joined his brother Rhadamanthys as one of the Judges of the Dead.

But the stain of sin persists. In the heart of Crete, in the mystery of the Labyrinth, lay the secret evidence of shame. The Minotaur grew and lived on, prowling alone in its unfathomable precinct. So long as it lived, it shadowed the mind of the people with guilt and uncertainty. It was a forbidden question. What was the Minotaur? None had seen it. What was the nature of the Labyrinth that contained the monster? Had the cunning of Daedalus put that beyond all conjecture?

Mantes the storyteller stopped speaking and there was silence in the hall as the audience felt a momentary touch of horror.

‘I heard a wise man say,’ a voice ventured at last, ‘that the Labyrinth was nothing more than the double-headed axe that struck down all who dared to enquire too far.’

‘Rather, I believe,’ said another who was no friend to Crete, ‘that it was the palace of a thousand rooms at Cnossus in which King Minos gave birth to his policy of blood and conquest. That was the monster.’

‘Perhaps,’ Mantes murmured, ‘it is only the metaphor for a malign dance, the to and fro of the human heart in which the monster of vanity and presumption lurks perpetually.’

The power of Crete was hard to withstand and here is no triumph without envy, no conquest without pain, no loss without anger. Minos ruled ninety cities. His ships went to the edge of Oceanus, where Atlas held up the sky. The chariot of Helios, flying from sunrise to sunset, barely covered the royal lands. But the success of Minos made others afraid. Daily, in the sharp light of Attica, the people of Athens saw the shadow of the Cretan empire creeping towards them, obliterating the older forms of life and property, obscuring boundaries with bloodstains. What did Crete want? The Athenians looked about them. They saw a modest patrimony: a plain of stones and olive trees and small fields standing amid bold, bare hills; a coast of rugged promontories and windblown beaches, turning westward at its southern tip into the sheltered haven of the Saronic Gulf. But the Athenians were not deluded. From the summit of the Acropolis, Pallas Athene had taught her people some of her wisdom. They knew that conquest comes chiefly from the will to power. The spoils of possession are incidental.

The death of a son gave Minos his chance. Androgeus was killed by Athenians, causing Minos to make a punitive expedition against Athens. He subdued the city and imposed a penance on the citizens. Every nine years, seven youths and seven maidens were taken from Athens to Cnossus as an offering to the Minotaur. The Labyrinth swallowed them and none ever returned.

Though Athenians claimed to be as ancient a people as any in the world, springing as they did from the earth-born Cecrops, in this time of Cretan strength Athens had long been weak and troubled. The gods had given with one hand and taken with the other. The kings were not fortunate. Their families were torn by violence and jealousy. A daughter was snatched away by the North Wind. Other children, defiled by rape and cruelty, were transformed into a hoopoe and a nightingale and a swallow. King Erechtheus, in a moment of victory, was slain by Poseidon. Princes were driven into exile. Plots were afoot continually. Frequent rebellion let no man rest. At this critical time, in answer to the king's prayer, a champion was born.

Aegeus, son of the exiled Pandion, had reclaimed the throne of Athens but he had no children. Unwilling to leave a disputed succession in a turbulent kingdom, he went to Delphi to consult the oracle. The reply, as so often, was mysterious.

'Do not untie your wine skin,' the priestess told him, 'until you reach your home on the Acropolis.'

On his return journey Aegeus puzzled over this message. At Corinth, the sorceress Medea offered to help. Her magic would produce him a son if he would promise her a refuge in Athens, should she ever need

it. The King agreed and she cast a spell. But at Troezen, King Pittheus saw the meaning of the oracle: Aegeus must not lie with a woman until he reached home. Now Pittheus saw a chance to influence the affairs of Athens. That night, he made Aegeus drunk and sent him to the bed of his daughter Aethra. In the morning Aegeus feared what might have happened, and he averted his face from the girl.

He mumbled an apology. 'Last night my wits were not with me. How went the night?'

'The night went as it usually goes,' replied Aethra, 'when man and woman lie naked in one bed.'

Then Aegeus swore her to silence and told her what to do if she gave birth to a son. If the boy, when he was old enough, could remove a large rock under which Aegeus would leave his sword and his sandals, then Aethra should send this son to Athens, to claim his inheritance. In nine months a boy was born, as Medea had promised, and he was named Theseus.

Theseus grew up tall and strong, like a tree rooted in rich earth. He was first in the footrace, the most powerful and agile in wrestling and boxing. His arrow split the exact centre of the target, and none could withstand his sword thrust. He feared nothing. Even Heracles, who visited Troezen and scared all the populace with his frown and his battle array, and with the snarling lionskin that hung from his shoulders, did not intimidate young Theseus. The boy, barely seven years old, took an axe from the woodpile and prepared to defend himself. When he reached sixteen he was already a man. He dedicated a lock of hair to Delphic Apollo and easily lifted the rock that revealed his father's gifts. When his mother had explained their significance, Theseus got ready to go to Athens.

He did not go by the short and easy sea route. He went by land, thirsty for experience and adventure. The world was a dangerous place. Cities were at war. The highway was bandit-ridden. Oppression grew fat on victims of turmoil. But Theseus slung his father's sword from his belt, slipped on the sandals and set out cheerfully. He breathed the invigorating air from the Gulf. In the clear light, the distant peaks of Cithaeron and Helicon summoned him onwards. He was eager for challenges. He wished to test himself against the hardship of the world as his great kinsman Heracles had done. He did not have to wait long for his first test.

At Epidaurus, by the sacred grove of the divine healer Asclepius, he was waylaid by Periphetes, the club-man, who robbed travellers with his huge brass-bound club.

'The grove of Asclepius is a place for healing, not for deadly wounds,' said Theseus with contempt. He wrenched the club from its owner and dispatched him with one blow.

Theseus kept the club, which was a murderous weapon very useful against brigands, and went on his way. Soon he was challenged again. Near Corinth, where the isthmus narrowed, he encountered Sinis, the pine-bender, who tore men apart between two springy pine trees. Theseus tied him to his own trees and watched him flung skywards. Next, he turned aside to hunt and kill a savage Grey Sow that was ravaging the land around Crommyon. Refreshed by the chase, Theseus returned to the highway and put an end to Sciron, a rogue who compelled travellers to wash his feet on the cliff top of Megara and then kicked them into the sea. Passing on to Eleusis, Theseus swept the wrestler Cercyon from the path, dashing him to the ground with such force that his skull was broken. Then, at the border of Attica, with Athens in sight, Theseus met Procrustes, the stretcher. This robber lured travellers to his house, overpowered them and bound them to a bed. Those who were too short were stretched, and those who were too long were chopped to fit. Theseus made Procrustes measure up to his own bed, and he did not survive.

At the gates of Athens, Theseus purified himself in the River Cephissus for the blood spilt on the journey. Then he entered his father's city looking so majestic that masons working by the road were amazed, even alarmed, by his presence. Truly, they thought, someone almost godlike has come to Athens.

But only Medea, instructed by her black arts, knew who this stranger was. Years before, while Theseus was growing up in Troezen, Medea had fled from Corinth and taken up the refuge that Aegeus had promised her. She bewitched the King, and married him in his old age, and gave birth to a son, Medus, whose way to the throne would be cut off if Theseus claimed his own birthright. So she prepared a feast for the attractive stranger and poisoned his wine-cup with wolfsbane. As Theseus lifted the cup, the pattern on the hilt of his sword was revealed and Aegeus recognized it at once. The king knocked the cup from Theseus' lips and overwhelmed his son with tears and rejoicing. In the midst of this happy hubbub, Medea wrapped herself in a magic cloud and disappeared.

After the tears and the laughter Aegeus grew suddenly solemn. He addressed Theseus in a serious, worried voice. 'My son,' he said, 'you come just in time. My nephews, the fifty sons of Pallas, are in open revolt. Heracles, that mighty and incalculable man, has inflicted a great trial on us. For reasons we do not know, he has abandoned a gigantic Cretan bull at Marathon and it is now laying waste the country. But worst of all, we approach the moment we most fear, when we must send our seven youths and seven maidens as a cruel tribute to Minos and the Minotaur.'

On the road from Troezen, Theseus had tested and proved his

heroism. He had served his apprenticeship. Now he was ready to accept the greater troubles of his father's land. The first two calamities facing Athens were easily put right. Theseus ambushed the sons of Pallas, defeated them and made them beg for peace. Then with bare hands he wrestled the bull of Marathon and dragged it to the Acropolis, as a sacrifice to Athene, holy patroness of the city.

But the tribute of youths and maidens demanded by Minos was a far more difficult problem. Theseus had no definite plan. He decided to go to Crete as one of the condemned youths and then he would see what happened. In any case, he was confident of success.

'We set out with black sails of woe,' he promised Aegeus, 'but we will return under white sails of joy.'

The ship left in gloom, pulled dejectedly towards Crete by the black sails. Even the weather was an enemy, the ship being battered around by the furious breath of Notus, the South Wind. In Crete, Minos stalked the harbour wall, scanning the seas with impatience, and as soon as the ship docked the king went aboard to inspect the victims. His eye was taken by one of the girls and, wishing to enjoy her before she died, he ordered his soldiers to lead her to the palace at Cnossus. In a rage, Theseus intervened. A martyrdom for Athens was at least a brave and dignified death. But to be deflowered first, as a matter of sport, was a cause of shame. He accused Minos of mean-spirited brutality unworthy of a king. The two exchanged angry words, arguing about their rival claims for nobility. Minos called on his father, Zeus, and in reply the Thunderer made the sky roar and the lightning flash. Theseus invoked the name of Poseidon and called on him as a witness.

'If the Earth-Shaker is such a friend,' Minos challenged, tossing a ring into deep water, 'let him help you recover that ring.'

At once, Theseus dived into the sea and plunged down to the palace of Poseidon where he was gracefully received by the sea-goddess Amphitrite. Dolphins were sent to scour the sea bed for the ring, which was soon found and returned. Then Amphitrite gave Theseus the ring and sent him ashore with an added favour from Poseidon: the god granted Theseus three wishes, to be used at any time in the future.

Despite the sign of divine favour, Minos did not intend to spare Theseus. He was paraded with the other Athenians in the streets of Cnossus, for the Cretans to stare at. But among those who stared was Ariadne, the king's daughter, and her heart went out to the bold and handsome youth who strode towards doom as if he had not a care in the world. She fell in love with him at first sight. That night, having bribed the guards, she visited Theseus in prison. On the morrow the Minotaur awaited him in the Labyrinth. But if Theseus would flee with

her and marry her, she would show him a way to escape the maze that Daedalus had once taught her. He promised, and then she gave him a large ball of string and directed him how to use it.

Next day, when the sun was hardly up, the fourteen Athenians were driven into the Labyrinth. Acts of tyranny are best done in silence, when the face of the world is turned aside. Theseus tied one end of the string to the gatepost and then set out into the maze. He walked in gloom, for the slanting light was still creeping down the high, narrow walls. All around was stench, decay, whitened bones, the debris of an abandoned world. Theseus did not know where he was going but he carefully unwound the ball of string as he penetrated deep into the maze. In an innermost recess he came upon the Minotaur sleeping on a bed of rotten straw. He took the monster in a brutal wrestler's hold and slowly strangled the life out of the beast. Then he consecrated the dead body as an offering to Poseidon.

Quickly, Theseus retreated through the twists of the Labyrinth, winding in the string as he went. At the gateway, where his fellow prisoners were still cowering in fright, he rallied the Athenians and gave the signal for Ariadne to open the doors. There was no guard. No one had ever escaped from the Labyrinth. In the greatest haste, Ariadne led the Athenians to the harbour where she had prepared a ship for their flight. They tumbled aboard, the rowers strained at the oars, and the ship was away before the alarm could be raised.

The sail was hoisted and the ship fled to Naxos. Theseus judged that they were now safe from pursuit, so all the ship's company went ashore to rest. But when the time came to sail on, unaccountably Ariadne was not on board. Who knew what had happened? Was this the sudden forgetfulness of a man burdened with the larger cares of his people? Some have whispered that there is a fatal carelessness in the nature of heroes, a brutal egotism that makes them discard others like shelled peas. They do not understand the anxieties and fears of ordinary humans. Awe-inspiring Heracles himself was guilty of casual and selfish cruelty. Others exempt Theseus from blame. They say that Dionysus saw Ariadne on Naxos and cast a spell on her, so that he could keep her to himself and bed her at will.

The ship sailed from Naxos to Delos, the birthplace of Apollo, where Theseus stopped to sacrifice and celebrate games in honour of the Divine Twin. Then the Athenians swooped joyously on a good wind towards home.

For a long time, old Aegeus had watched daily from the cliff, anxiously searching for the white sail that would indicate safety and success. But Theseus, in his hurry to reach Athens, forgot his promise. The king saw the ship approach with its black sail still spread. In despair, Aegeus threw himself into the sea, which is now called the

‘Consider,’ said Mantes, after a pause, ‘the turning moments in great affairs. Failure and success chase each other, rolling end over end like tumblers at a village fair. Consider Daedalus, Minos, Theseus himself – three mighty men. The Fates bore them up to a dizzy height, then pulled them down with a sudden hand.’

Mantes looked around the dinner guests. The meal had ended and there was an air of content. Idly, some were cracking almonds and walnuts, while others peered with more hope than expectation into the lees of the wine-cup. Mantes saw no reason not to go on.

‘When Theseus escaped the Labyrinth, King Minos knew who to blame. Only Daedalus understood the workings of that maze. He had given the secret to Ariadne. So Minos arrested Daedalus and clapped the inventor into his own Labyrinth, and for good measure threw his son Icarus in with him. Daedalus had plenty of time to contemplate his fall: from chief artificer of Crete to prisoner in one step. But Daedalus was not the man to pine. Every physical event had an answer, he felt, somewhere in the ferment of his ingenuity. And lying on his back between the narrow walls of the maze, watching the sky and the shifting clouds and the freedom of the birds, he suddenly saw the answer.

‘At once, he set to work, using the left-over pieces and the forgotten material of the Labyrinth. He gathered feathers, cord and wax, and he made two pairs of powerful wings. He strapped one pair to his own arms and the other to the arms of Icarus. Then he gave his son instructions: “Fly not too high, for the fierce flames of Helius will melt the wax; nor too low, for the sea-spray will drench your feathers and bring you down.” But who can restrain youth? The freedom of the air was an intoxication that Icarus could not resist. He flew higher and higher, towards the eye of the sun, until the wax melted and he fell like a broken doll into the arms of the sea. Cautiously, Daedalus flew on, leaving Crete far behind, until he came to rest in the Sicilian land of King Cocalus. And there he stayed, in mourning and in retirement.

‘But vengeful Minos was not finished with Daedalus. He was determined to pursue him to the edge of the world. He took a ship and roamed the seas, for he did not know where Daedalus’ wings had taken him. Wherever he landed he gave the ruler or governor a test which he knew could only be solved with the help of Daedalus. The test was to pass a thread upward through the interior of a spiral seashell. No one could do this until Minos came to Camicus, in Sicily, where King Cocalus dribbled a thin trail of honey through the shell and then tempted an ant to draw a thread along that path to a hole

bored in the tip. Minos guessed at once that Daedalus had devised this method and demanded the surrender of the great inventor. But the daughters of Cocalus, whom Daedalus had amused with many pretty toys and trifles, plotted with their friend against Minos. They ran a pipe into the bath-house, and when Minos was soaking away the cares of his long journey they scalded him to death with boiling water, or, some say, with hot pitch.'

The great king died ignobly, and within a generation his empire was in ruins. The Fates swung the balance. Crete had been too high, too proud. Down it went, and Athens rose into the glare of history.

At first, Theseus could afford to crow over the death of his most powerful opponent. When he returned from Cnossus, and became king, Theseus set out to unify and strengthen his land. When he met opposition, he executed his enemies out of hand. Then he joined the twelve rival clans of Attica into a federation under the leadership of Athens and founded the All-Athenian Games to celebrate the occasion. He made treaties and agreed borders. To settle a long-rankling dispute, he put up a large board at a certain point on the isthmus of Corinth. On one face it said: 'All this way is the Peloponnese.' And on the other face: 'All this way is Ionia.' To the south, pointing towards Crete and the lands of almost forgotten histories, was the old Greece. To the north and east, pointing towards Macedonia and Asia, was the new Greece. In this second direction lay the dangerous future. And Theseus himself had to face this danger. His policies stirred the Amazons into war, and these fierce warrior women swept out of the frozen north to besiege Athens from their camp on the hill of Ares. With difficulty, Theseus defeated them and kept their Queen Antiope as a prize.

After a time, when he had secured his borders, Theseus could turn to the civic affairs of his city. He wrote a constitution for Athens, which set out the duties for the city fathers and the magistrates, for the tradesmen and for the farmers. He minted the first coinage, stamped with the bull of Poseidon. His heralds went throughout Greece, inviting people of talent and energy to go to Athens and become citizens. Even the Delphic oracle acknowledged the success of Athens. The priestess prophesied that Athens would ride the current of history as easily as a pig's bladder rode the sea in a storm.

Theseus had a son called Hippolytus whose mother was the Amazon Antiope. But when Theseus wanted to ally himself to Crete, he set Antiope aside and married the Cretan princess Phaedra, sister of Ariadne and daughter of Minos. It is ever this way with great men, that policy dictates marriage, not love. Hippolytus grew up in Troezen, a severe, silent youth who was devoted to chaste Artemis and lived only for hunting. This coldness towards love was an affront to

Aphrodite and she decided to make him suffer. When Hippolytus came to Eleusis to perform certain rites, looking so haughty and unapproachable in his ceremonial robes, Aphrodite made sure that Phaedra saw him. At that moment Eros, God of Desire, released his malicious arrow and Phaedra's heart was lost to Hippolytus.

Phaedra tried to restrain her infatuation. But growing haggard and sleepless she gave way to desire and wrote to Hippolytus, admitting her incestuous passion. Hippolytus rejected her in disgust. Then Phaedra took a despairing revenge. She wrote a note to Theseus, incriminating Hippolytus, and hanged herself from the lintel of the doorway. When Theseus read the letter his mind nearly burst. He called to the gods and cursed his son – he hardly knew what he was doing – but Poseidon heard him and counted the curse as one of the three wishes he had granted to Theseus below the sea. As Hippolytus fled from his father's wrath, whipping his horses into a furious pace along the seashore, Poseidon sent a bull charging out of the waves. The horses bolted in terror, the chariot broke its axle on the root of an old gnarled olive tree, and Hippolytus was thrown and dragged to death in a tangle of reins and splintered wood.

When the wheel of fortune begins to turn, who can arrest it? After his wife and son were destroyed, Theseus plunged into senseless activity, as if heroic energy alone could save him. He made a wild wager with Peirithous, the madcap and dangerous King of the Lapiths, that each would find a new bride from among the children of the gods. Together, they raided Sparta and abducted Helen, the twelve-year-old daughter of Zeus and Leda, whom Theseus intended to marry when she came of age. But Peirithous, with overweening vanity, coveted not the child of a god but the goddess Persephone herself, the Queen of the Underworld. Theseus wanted nothing to do with this plan, but he was bound to the Lapith king by oath. The two of them entered Tartarus through the chasm at Taenarum and attempted to lay hands on the dark queen. But Hades easily forestalled them and fixed them to the Seat of Forgetfulness, from which they could not tear themselves. And there they remained for four years, guarded by serpents and lashed by Furies, until Heracles used his superhuman strength to pull Theseus free. Peirithous was left to eternal damnation, for his insolence could not be forgiven by the gods.

A

him also?' and Theseus?' the patriarch interrupted. 'The gods abandoned The fringe of the sky was now touched with pink by the declining sun. The dog had shaken off its somnolence and was wrinkling its nose hungrily towards the kitchen door. Inside the house, the hall was

brushed with shadows. It was almost time to light the lamps. The patriarch rose briskly. He had neglected the household for long enough, and in any case he thought he knew the end of the story.

‘It is truer to say,’ Mantes replied, ‘that Theseus abandoned the gods. We get no more than we deserve. What king deserves to prosper if he leaves his kingdom adrift for four years? While Theseus was imprisoned in Tartarus, those strong men Castor and Polydeuces – the Dioscuri – invaded Attica and rescued their sister Helen. They left the land in an uproar for which Theseus, rightly, was blamed. When he returned at last, the citizens turned on him angrily and drove him into exile. Menestheus, a grandson of Erechtheus, was installed in his place. Theseus sailed for Crete. But a storm blew his ship to Scyros where King Lycomedes received him with every mark of respect. This king, however, was secretly in league with Menestheus, who feared Theseus and would be glad to see the end of him. As the great hero was taking the air on the cliffs of Scyros, exchanging many gracious words with Lycomedes, the king gave a signal to his servants and they kicked Theseus into the sea.’

The patriarch nodded sadly. ‘It is not wise to trifle with the Holy One. There is a limit assigned to humans that none may go beyond, not even a hero, not even Theseus.’



Bellerophon, on Pegasus, Kills the Chimaera

HOMELAND

A ‘can take any number of barbarians and make Greeks of them. For it is not so much the person, but the land that teaches. The earth, the mountains, the rivers, the valleys, the fields, the very stones are Greek and make Greeks in their turn.’

In his long life, the old poet had searched every corner of the land for its spirit and its story. At last, this illumination had come to him and then he was content, waiting for black-robed Death to call him away. In a hut of mud and rubble, roofed with reeds, he lay patiently, his arms crossed, uneasy breath puckering his toothless mouth. Outside, in the Eurotas valley, harsh light flooded over the laurels and the pebbles of the desert, as it had always done. The Taygetus mountains raised their five powerful fingers into the heavens. In dark fissures, a few silver threads glittered where streams shrank into the ravenous ground.

‘Listen,’ the old man said urgently, ‘the land conquers all and makes us what we are.’

Later, as he buried the poet in the white, sorched soil of the Peloponnese, Mantes pondered on this motherland that nourished her children from such a thin, famished breast.

From the first, it was a land born under disadvantage, under a god’s curse. Both Hera and Poseidon claimed it, but when Inachus, the local river-god, awarded possession to Hera, Poseidon afflicted the land with aridity, thirst and perpetual summer drought. Io, daughter of Inachus, was only the first of many who were driven away in suffering but ached to return. Who can forget the realm of the gods?

Io was loved by Zeus, who turned her into a white heifer to deceive Hera. But Hera tethered the heifer in an olive grove at Mycenae and set hundred-eyed Argus Panoptes on guard, until Hermes cut out the eyes of the sleeping Argus and released the heifer. Then angry Hera chased Io through the world in a cloud of gadflies. Maddened by stings the white heifer plunged across the sea – the Ionian – which now bears her name and fled as far as India, where she turned tail and

was pursued by the biting flies into the valley of the Nile. At last, she was allowed to rest. Restored to human form, Io looked homeward in vain. She settled by the Nile and had to console herself with the birth of Epaphus, her son by Zeus.

Her children, and the children of her children, ruled in North Africa until, after many years, the brothers Aegyptus and Danaus came to blows. Warned by an oracle to beware of Aegyptus and his fifty sons, Danaus took his fifty daughters and sailed for Argos, the land of his ancestors. The king and the people of Argos laughed at the pretention of this newcomer and his claim to the land. But when a wolf came in the night and killed the Argives' leading bull, the people accepted this sign and made Danaus their king. Soon, the sons of Aegyptus came in arms, besieged the city and demanded the fifty daughters of Danaus in marriage. Danaus pretended to agree. But when the youths came to their brides in the night, the women stabbed their husbands to death, all except for Lynceus who was spared by Hypermnestra because he had not taken her maidenhead.

Danaus died without a son and the kingdom passed to Lynceus. The exiled branches of the family were reconciled and joined. The descendants of Io had come home to their roots which, now as ever, lay deep in the hungry, bloodstained south.

Within two generations the family enmity that had separated brothers on African soil was repeated, in Argos, after the birth of the twins Acrisius and Proetus. These two fought even in the womb. And their later rivalry was so bitter and intense that they decided to share the kingdom.

Acrisius took Argos while Proetus went to Tiryns where seven giant Cyclopes built for him, out of stones too large for even a mule team to shift, massive walls and battlements brooding over sombre gates and arrow-slits and lanes like pools of darkness.

Acrisius, having only a daughter called Danae, went to consult an oracle about his lack of an heir. But the oracle gave him a grim reply: 'You will have no son, yet you will die by your grandson's hand.' In haste, Acrisius locked Danae away in a dungeon, with fierce dogs to guard her. But ever-roaming Zeus, who noted her beauty and her distress, appeared to her as a shower of gold. Penetrated by this radiance, Danae gave birth to a son called Perseus.

Afraid to kill his own daughter, Acrisius locked mother and child in a wooden chest and tossed it into the sea. After drifting with wind and current the chest lodged on the isle of Seriphos where a fisherman walking the shore heard, among the clamour of the sea birds, another despairing wail, which proved to be the bawling of a baby. He broke open the chest and took the sea-bedraggled couple to King Polydectes who, touched by the beauty of Danae and the sorry pathos of her

child, took them into his household.

The king's feeling for Danae grew into love, but she rejected all offers of marriage and Polydectes hesitated to push the matter further because Perseus had grown into a formidable youth, quite capable of defending his mother. Anxious to be rid of the threat posed by the young man's strong arm, Polydectes thought of a stratagem.

He announced that he had set his heart on another woman and demanded from each of his nobles the gift of a horse, so that he would not appear at her door as a poor, unworthy suitor. Perseus, ashamed that he had neither horse nor gold to buy one, recklessly promised to bring Polydectes something beyond horses, beyond even gold, 'even, if the king so wished, the head of the Gorgon Medusa'.

Polydectes accepted immediately.

Alone with his task, with nothing but his courage and his foolhardiness to help him, Perseus resigned himself to the will of the gods. Fortunately for him, Athene heard his rash boast and took him in hand. The grey-eyed goddess was an enemy of Medusa. This Gorgon, one of three sisters, was a monster born of the sea, a female with batwings that creaked like leather, claws of brass, the tusks of a boar, and a head that sprouted venomous snakes. One glance into the eyes of Medusa turned animal or human to stone. All this was hateful to Athene, the source of wisdom and reason. To her, the Gorgons were foul emanations from a time of primordial perversity, so she willingly taught Perseus how to go about his dangerous task.

First, she showed Perseus how to tell Medusa apart from her sisters and gave him a polished metal shield, so that he could approach the monster with head averted, homing in on the reflection in the shield. Then Hermes provided an adamant sickle, able to cut a ship's hawser with one blow. And as further aides in this desperate venture Athene promised Perseus a pair of winged sandals, a magic pouch, and Hades' cap of invisibility. But to fetch them, Perseus would have to seek out the Graeae, for only those strange wizened hags, with but one eye and one tooth between them, knew where to find the nymphs who kept these objects.

The Graeae refused to talk, dribbling age-old malevolence from shrivelled gums. Then Perseus deftly intercepted the eye and the tooth as they passed hand to hand and wrung from the hags the information he needed. Collecting the sandals, the pouch and the dog-skin cap from the nymphs, Perseus was carried aloft by the sandals and flew swiftly to the far northwest land of the Hyperboreans, where rain swept over the cold barrens, scouring into ugly shapes the beasts and humans turned to stone by the eye of Medusa.

The three Gorgons were asleep in a wilderness of mud. Looking steadily into the reflection on the shield, Perseus picked out Medusa

and severed her neck with a single stroke, making sure that the head with its corona of writhing snakes dropped into the magic pouch. Immediately, the body of Medusa burst like rotten fruit and from it sprang the winged horse Pegasus and the warrior Chrysaor who clasped a golden sword. These were the children of Poseidon, for the lust of the sea-god was pressed even on monsters. As Pegasus winged towards heaven, Perseus, too, was in flight. Behind, he heard the howling of Stheno and Euryale, the Gorgon sisters, but he was safely hidden from their eyes by the cap of invisibility.

A thing of evil became, through the intervention of holy Athene, a force for good. Medusa's head, with its glance that turned to stone, had spread around it a frozen world of suspended shock and grief. But safely contained in the magic pouch it became, in Perseus' hands, a weapon more powerful than any sword or bow.

Speeding from the land of the Hyperboreans along the north shore of Africa, Perseus paused to show the head to Atlas, turning him into a mountain of stone and thus relieving the weary Titan from the burden of the sky. Aware now of the potency of his prize, Perseus flew high and fast to the east. Over Libya, drops of Gorgon blood dripped from the pouch and became the poisonous snakes of the desert floor. Then, turning homeward, Perseus saw below by the cliffs of Philistia a young woman chained to a rock at which the waves snapped hungrily. On the cliff-top a man and a woman strained their eyes towards the horizon.

When Perseus landed he discovered that King Cepheus and his wife, Cassiopeia, were watching over their daughter Andromeda. Queen Cassiopeia had foolishly boasted that she and her daughter were more beautiful than the Nereid sea-nymphs, and to teach her some modesty Poseidon was sending a sea-monster to devastate the land. Only the sacrifice of Andromeda to the monster would save the kingdom.

Was it the maiden or her danger that struck Perseus' heart? In any case, she was beautiful, and a cause for pity, and Perseus determined to save her and marry her. He mounted once more into the air and flew over the approaching monster, which was distracted by the shadow on the water of this strange winged beast. Suddenly the monster found itself confronted by the Gorgon's head and was turned to stone. When Perseus had released Andromeda – the marks of the chains are still shown on the rock-face at Joppa – he took the girl from the reluctant arms of her parents and carried her back as his wife to the island of Seriphos.

On the island, Perseus found that his mother, Danae, was still in danger from Polydectes who, in final exasperation, had locked her in a temple to choose between marriage and starvation. The king was feasting with his friends when Perseus came to the palace. A ragged,

drunken cheer greeted the new arrival.

‘Hail to the Gorgon-slayer!’ they cried insolently, for they were quite sure that he had failed. ‘What’s in your pouch, young braggart? Is it as empty as your promises?’

Slowly, with closed eyes, Perseus raised Medusa’s head from the pouch, held it high, and then lowered it quietly to its resting place. When he opened his eyes, and looked round, instead of feasting guests he saw only a circle of stones.

Danae was released, the sandals, pouch and cap returned to the guardian nymphs, and the head of Medusa presented to Athene to wear on her aegis. Then Perseus left Seriphos for Argos, the land of his birth. King Acrisius heard of his approach and, remembering the oracle, fled to Larissa in panic, abandoning his kingdom to the grandson he feared but did not know.

It was Perseus’ country, but what did he know of it? The ground, when he landed at noon, crinkled with heat and the sun seemed to ooze molten drops from the dusty needles of the pines. The vertical sun gave no shadow, no cloak to hide the extreme nudity of the earth. The lines lay on the land like knife-cuts. A heart-stopping emptiness blazed with light almost too powerful to look on. A shepherd boy, who seemed to be elbowing a thorn tree for its thin cover, threw languid stones at a goat nosing the ground for the last green twig. Something in the absolute clarity, in the shock of an unavoidable, simple choice between surviving and not surviving, welcomed Perseus home.

Now, it happened that some time later Perseus was invited to Larissa to take part in the funeral games of the dead king. In these games, when Perseus came to throw the discus, the wind caught it and carried it far into the crowd where it struck and killed an old man whom Perseus had never seen before. A bystander informed him that the dignified old man was well known in Larissa, a certain Acrisius, once King of Argos.

What the oracle foretold was fulfilled. It is vain to outguess the gods, vain to try to outrun the Fates. To be Greek is to accept no hiding place.

Mboth the desolation and the stark choices were in his blood. But what drew princes from across the seas? Gold, women, horses? Yes, all of those. Also the sense of a worthy but dangerous trial, the wish to do heroic acts under the very eyes of the gods. Amber, rubbed on a sleeve, will attract the wayward scraps, rich or poor.’

Pelops was the millionaire of Asia Minor, a son of the doomed

Tantalus, who had tried to feed human flesh to the gods. But for all his riches he was restless. The mines of Mount Sipylus, in his native Lydia, gave him wealth but he could not settle there. He remembered the blood-guilt of his father. That was the past. The future was the unimaginable weight of Asia that pressed on all sides. Perhaps also he dreamt of water, and of compact lands with known boundaries and known gods. He had drifted to Paphlagonia, to Phrygia, on to the Black Sea and then back to Lydia. Nothing satisfied him. Then he heard of the fame of the beautiful Hippodameia, daughter of King Oenomaus who ruled Elis and Pisa in the territory of Arcadia. He decided to marry her. He would gladly settle in a new land, near the playground of the gods at Olympia, and he would not look back.

Many princes had wooed Hippodameia but her father was afraid to lose her. Some said he was in love with her himself, for Oenomaus set each suitor a stern test.

The king was a passionate horseman, with such a high regard for horses that he forbade his subjects to mate mares with asses, even though they needed mules to work their farms. He challenged each suitor to a chariot race and laid out a long and difficult course between the sacred precinct at Olympia and the altar of Poseidon on the isthmus of Corinth. Hippodameia was the prize to be won and Oenomaus had no doubts about victory, for the horses of his chariot were a gift from Ares and swifter even than the North Wind. Losers in the race had their heads chopped off and their bodies thrown to scavengers. Already, as a warning to others, twelve heads were fixed to poles by the palace gates.

Blood shed in a great cause, where armies clashed and noble acts were done – that was something the gods could accept. But the cruel slaughter of hopeful young men was offensive to the Holy Ones. They suspected, with disgust, that Oenomaus intended to build a temple of skulls. So when Pelops prayed to Poseidon for help in the race, the Earth-Shaker responded and sent him a golden chariot pulled by immortal horses. And to make victory doubly sure Pelops also bribed Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, offering him the first rites of the wedding night if Oenomaus were defeated. Myrtilus agreed, for he too loved Hippodameia. As he prepared the king's chariot, he used wax instead of metal pins to secure the wheels on the axle.

In the fury of the race the wax melted, the wheels fell off, and Oenomaus was flung to his death. Pelops won Hippodameia but he did not keep his promise to Myrtilus. Instead of granting him the first rites of love, Pelops had him hurled into the sea. As he drowned the deceived charioteer laid a bitter curse on Pelops and all his house. For the second time, a curse lay heavy on the southern lands.

But had the gods heard Myrtilus, for he was not without guilt

himself? Pelops married Hippodameia and inherited the kingdom. Slowly he extended his power through all the land that spread out below the narrow collar of the Corinthian isthmus until he ruled the whole territory, governing his new domain from the old city of Argos. And having unified the country he renamed it the Peloponnese in his own honour. The years blessed him with fame and even greater riches, and with many children among whom were the sons Atreus and Thyestes.

These two were enemies from birth. They were destined to quarrel, if not for a favourite toy, then over a game of knuckle-bones; if not over a woman, then for a kingdom. When Atreus married the Cretan princess Aerope, Thyestes made it his business to seduce his sister-in-law and together the lovers plotted against Atreus. After the death of Pelops, when the brothers became rivals for the throne of Mycenae, Thyestes saw a way to his ultimate triumph. He would take both wife and kingdom from Atreus.

Atreus had vowed to offer his finest lamb as a sacrifice to Artemis. But when his shepherd brought him a lamb with a golden fleece, he was astonished and could not bear to fulfill the whole sacrifice. So he compromised with the goddess. He slaughtered the lamb at the altar and made Artemis a burnt offering of the meat, but he kept the golden fleece and hid it away in a chest. It seemed to him to be a true emblem of royalty. But Aerope knew what he had done, and she stole the fleece and gave it to her lover, Thyestes.

Soon afterwards the question of the kingship was debated before the people of Mycenae.

‘I am the elder,’ said Atreus, ‘but that is not enough. Kingship is a sacred office. Let it go to him whom the gods favour. I claim that divine favour by right of a golden fleece, which I alone possess.’

Thyestes smiled. ‘That indeed is a remarkable sign. I agree that he who has the golden fleece is divinely blessed and he should be king.’

Then Thyestes produced the fleece and his brother, defeated by his own words, gave up the kingdom to him. But Zeus, Provider of Justice, was not satisfied with this trickery. He sent Hermes with a message for Atreus.

‘Challenge your brother in this way: “If the sun runs backwards will you give up the kingdom?”’

The proposition was ridiculous and Thyestes accepted with amusement. Then Zeus ordered Helios to turn his horses at midday and drive the chariot of the sun back east, to the stables of the dawn. Thus the anger of Zeus was made known. In shame, Thyestes abandoned the throne and went into exile.

Old wounds fester. When Atreus learnt all the wrongs done to him by his wife and brother, he brooded on their crimes and planned

revenge. After a while he pretended to be reconciled to Thyestes and tempted him back to Mycenae with the offer of a half-share of the kingdom. Then he welcomed his brother with a gruesome feast. He forced several of Thyestes' children to leave the refuge of a temple sanctuary, butchered them, and cooked them in a stew which he served to his brother.

Thyestes ate with good appetite.

'You have eaten well, my brother,' said Atreus.

'Truly, it was a tasty dish,' Thyestes replied.

'You are satisfied? Then let me show you the rare ingredients of such a fine stew.'

Then the heads and the hands and the feet of the slaughtered children were brought in on silver platters and set before their father.

Vomiting with horror and grief Thyestes called on the gods for justice and fled once more from Mycenae. He went first to Delphi, to ask the oracle what he should do, and he received a reply that was almost worse than his present torment: 'Your son by your own daughter shall avenge you.'

Desperate for revenge and feeling helpless to avert what the Fates ordained, Thyestes went on to Sicyon where his daughter Pelopia was a priestess of Athene. Disguised in a mask, he waylaid her at night and raped her. She gave birth to a son called Aegisthus.

Now the curses began to bite home in the unlucky land. The great scheme of crime and punishment slowly unfolded. The country withered with disease and famine. Strange omens appeared, beasts with two heads, wells flowing blood, trees bursting with sudden flame. Princes roamed land and sea looking for victims, for scapegoats, to test the edge of their swords. Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus, searched for their uncle Thyestes with murder in mind. Aegisthus, when his family history was revealed to him, sent a bloody sword to Atreus, to trick him into believing that Thyestes was dead. In the celebration that followed at Mycenae, when Atreus was off his guard, Aegisthus took the same sword and slit Atreus' throat.

Vengeance began to pall. Men stumbled in the weary round of killing. Atreus had been killed and Thyestes died. Aegisthus was banished. King Agamemnon reigned in Argos. The Furies were satiated and, for the moment, the parched land drank no more blood of family hatred and revenge. But the curse of Myrtilus – the long-echoing and oft-repeated curse that sped to the very summit of Olympus – was not yet expunged.

N Corinth. Going east, on the cliff-top path, he went by ragged fields of barley, stones marooned in a sea of wild flowers, small olive trees as old and seamed as the face of time. His feet, brushing the herbs, raised pungent scents. At his back, bleak mountains stood sharp in the sun, the peaks still capped with snow in the early summer. All around he was aware of land set in an emerald-glitter of water, an untamed land-mass burnished ruddy in the sun, pinched at the isthmus by two seas out of which rose cliffs, bluffs, capes, gulfs, and the confusion of a thousand islands.

Often he looked back, as if to commit home to memory. Nothing escaped the light. Every detail was clear, reinforcing the solemnity of leave-taking. Bees cast their drowsy spell, a few swift birds scouted the inshore waters. A donkey, standing stubborn and still as a grey rock in the midst of restless, grazing wild horses, twitched just the tip of its tail. In a tiny patch of shade a boy held a young goat in his arms, both asleep.

Prince Bellerophon went slowly on, his steps heavy and reluctant. He was going into exile and parting was as painful as a spear-thrust.

Bellerophon had killed a kinsman in a brawl and he was fleeing from Corinth. It was a piece of misfortune, but misfortune dogged his family. His grandfather was Sisyphus, he who had tricked the gods and paid for his temerity in the torments of Tartarus. His father, Glaucus, was torn apart by his own maddened horses in a chariot race at the Isthmian Games. Carrying his burden of ill-luck, Bellerophon fled to the court of King Proetus in Tiryns where he hoped to begin his life again. But misfortune still followed him.

In Tiryns, Queen Sthenoboea fell in love with him at first sight, and when Bellerophon rejected her advances she accused him of trying to seduce her. Proetus believed his wife but dared not kill a suppliant, for that would bring down on him the revenge of the Furies. So he sent Bellerophon with a sealed letter on an embassy to King Iobates of Lycia, in Asia Minor. Iobates was the father of Sthenoboea, and the letter said: 'Kill the bearer. He tried to violate she who is your daughter and my wife.'

Iobates had no wish to kill this strange prince, but he had to do something out of respect for his son-in-law. After much puzzlement he thought he saw a way out of his predicament. He would send Bellerophon to destroy the Chimaera, a grim maker of widows and orphans, a fire-breathing monster that was part lion, part goat and part snake. Either Bellerophon would kill the monster, or the monster would kill him. For the king, either course had something to be said for it.

Before he set out Bellerophon consulted a soothsayer who advised him that his task would be easier if he caught and harnessed the winged horse Pegasus. This was no easy matter. What human could hope to bridle a semi-divine beast, born of Poseidon and Medusa? Despondently, Bellerophon looked for Pegasus. The horse was not at its usual home on Mount Helicon where, with a stamp of a hoof, it had brought forth the spring called Hippocrene, the sacred fount of the Muses. Pegasus had flown to the Acrocorinthus where it grazed amid the swift and ferocious wild horses of the isthmus.

Unable to approach the winged horse, Bellerophon gave up for the day and went to rest in the temple of Athene. He prayed in the courtyard, and then he slept. In this sleep Athene appeared to him in a dream and placed in his hands a celestial bridle. When he awoke the bridle lay on the ground beside him. From a short distance, Bellerophon threw the bridle over the neck of the wary horse. With one last thrash of anger Pegasus pawed the ground, causing the Peirene spring to gush, and then he stood quietly, waiting to be handled. Bellerophon mounted and flew to Lycia where the Chimaera withered the country from flame-breathing nostrils. High above, Pegasus swooped from out of the sun while Bellerophon transfixed the monster with deadly arrows.

When Bellerophon returned in triumph to Iobates, the king was still not satisfied. The hero and the winged horse made a powerful instrument of war which Iobates was determined to use. Bellerophon was sent to defeat the Solymians and the Amazons and to repulse an invasion of Carian pirates. His only defeat came from a band of Xanthian women who advanced upon him with skirts raised to their chins, forcing Bellerophon to abandon the field out of modesty.

At last, Iobates was convinced that Bellerophon was innocent of the charge from Tiryns. He produced the letter from Proetus, and when Bellerophon had explained the true circumstances of Stheneboea's jealousy the king asked forgiveness and gave Bellerophon his daughter Philopoe in marriage. Bellerophon became king in time, and he still kept Pegasus in his royal stables.

Although he prospered Bellerophon could not shake off the shadow of his pest. He ruled in Lycia but he was a man of Corinth, city of Sisyphus' sacrilege and Glaucus' pride, bold city of licence where a thousand priestesses ministered to the rites of love in the temple of Aphrodite. In the perfumed, shaded courtyards of the temple lewd and many-breasted Astarte had taken refuge from her eastern home.

Cruel and unlucky acts were woven into the tapestry of Bellerophon's kingship. He killed Stheneboea out of revenge, throwing her from the back of high-flying Pegasus. Deaths came suddenly, his own children being struck down in their prime by war and illness. At

last, Bellerophon himself succumbed to pride, his father's sin, the sin of Corinth. He mounted Pegasus and drove the horse towards the summit of Olympus, as if he himself were divine. Zeus, God of Retribution, stung Pegasus with biting insects so that the winged horse bucked high in the heavens and threw Bellerophon from its back. Alone, Pegasus continued to Olympus where Zeus harnessed the magic horse to his thunder-cart. But the flights of mankind, though they might aspire towards the gods, can never mount that high. Disgraced Bellerophon fell into a thorn bush, broken and crippled, and limped away far from the eyes of men.

A beast under the eyes of the gods. Then, suddenly, there are humans. At first, lands are empty, possessed only by the weather and the Space waits to be filled. An obscure destiny drives the feet of mankind onwards. Who knows where they are going? Each person yearns for some condition, some unknown resolution, that will ease the heart. But the gods dispose.

When Zeus abducted Europa, and Agenor saw his daughter disappear into the sea on the back of a bull, the king could not know where she had gone. He sent his sons to scour the earth for her return. Phoenix searched diligently along the North African shore, then he came back and founded the kingdom of Phoenicia. Cilix travelled to Asia Minor and stayed, giving his name to Cilicia. Thasus, discovering some gold on an island, claimed it and called it Thasos. Cadmus wandered with his mother, Telephassa, first to Rhodes, then through the islands of the Cyclades and Dolopes to Thrace, where Telephassa took ill and died.

Not sure how to go on, Cadmus went to Delphi to question the oracle. The priestess told him to look for Europa no more, for having found the land of All-Seeing Zeus he had, in a sense, also found Europa. Now he was to follow a cow with a moon-mark on its flank and to build a city where the cow lay down to rest. It was an invitation from Apollo to become Greek, and how could Cadmus reject the will of the god? On the road to Phocis, Cadmus found a cow with a moon-mark in the herd of King Pelagon and drove the animal east into Boeotia, a land unknown to him. After they had travelled far without a pause the cow lay down near the River Asopus. It was a pleasant spot for a town, on a hill flank overlooking the green of the river valley.

Once its task was done, the cow's life was forfeit to the gods. But collecting water for the sacrifice, the men with Cadmus were killed by a dragon guarding a spring sacred to Ares. Cadmus was forced to crush the head of the dragon with a large rock. After the sacrifice

Athene appeared and ordered Cadmus to gather the dragon's teeth and sow them in the ground. At once, an army of fierce warriors sprang up, clashing their arms and quarreling. These were the Sparti, the 'Sown Men'. Cadmus threw stones among them and they began to brawl, accusing each other of assault, hacking at each other until only five were left alive. Tired of killing, the five survivors acknowledged Cadmus and helped him build a city, at first called Cadmeia but which later became Thebes.

For a while all went well. Cadmus founded a civil society, teaching the rough farmers of Boeotia an alphabet he had brought from the east. By the grace of Zeus, he married Harmonia, becoming the first human to wed a child of the gods. And the Olympians themselves attended the marriage feast in state. Athene wove the wedding robe. Hephaestus made a golden necklace as a gift. Demeter brought seed-corn for the fields, and Hermes gave Cadmus a lyre.

But Ares, the rancorous war-god, had not forgotten the death of his dragon, even though Cadmus had atoned with eight years of servitude. Because of this hatred by Ares, Dionysus, in an inspired fit, foretold a violent and blood-spattered future for Thebes. Cadmus and Harmonia were rescued from calamity, but at the cost of being transformed into spotted serpents. Children of the royal family suffered and died. Foolish Semele looked on Zeus in his glory and perished. Pentheus was torn apart by Maenads. Ino and her husband, Athamas, were driven mad by Hera. Laius, taking refuge at the court of Pelops at Pisa, offended heaven by abducting the son of his host. The crown of Thebes rested on uneasy heads.

Laius, when he became king, married Iocaste, but wished to set her aside after an oracle warned him that his son would kill him. Iocaste, however, made Laius drunk and lay with him and gave birth to a son whom Laius exposed on Mount Cithaeron with a spike through his feet. But the boy did not die. A shepherd found him and took him to King Polybus of Corinth who, having no child of his own, adopted him and named him Oedipus, or 'Swell-foot', because of his damaged feet.

One day, when Oedipus was grown up, a Corinthian taunted him for being a bastard. In distress, Oedipus went to Delphi to question the oracle, but the priestess drove him away in horror.

'Do not pollute this holy place,' she cried, 'for you are destined to kill your father and marry your mother.'

Knowing no other family and city than those of King Polybus in Corinth, Oedipus got away from there as quickly as possible and fled to Boeotia. At a narrow pass, where the road went through the Divided Ways, Oedipus found the path blocked by King Laius in a chariot, though neither man knew the other.

'Make way, peasant,' the king shouted.

‘My birth is as good as yours,’ Oedipus answered. ‘I stand firm.’

‘Then try to withstand this,’ cried Laius, whipping the chariot forward so that a wheel ran over Oedipus’ wounded foot.

‘Violence begets violence,’ roared Oedipus in a rage. And he hurled his spear, striking Laius with a lucky hit and killing him.

When Oedipus arrived in Thebes the news of the king’s death, by an unknown assassin, had preceded him. The city was in an uproar, for it was already suffering from the ravages caused by the Sphinx. This winged monster, part woman and part lion, devoured all travellers who could not answer its riddle. And now the king was dead. Creon, the regent, harried by two problems, tried to solve them both by offering his widowed sister Queen Iocaste in marriage to anyone who would rid the land of the Sphinx.

Full of the confidence of youth, Oedipus accepted the challenge and confronted the monster.

‘What,’ said the Sphinx, getting ready to feast on yet another foolish man, ‘goes on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening’?

But Oedipus had the answer at once. ‘Mankind, which crawls on all-fours as a baby, walks upright in maturity, and leans on a staff in old age.’

Angry and surprised, the Sphinx spread its wings and flew away. Some say that it dashed into the rocks and killed itself out of mortification. But Oedipus was left to claim his reward. In all ignorance, he married his mother, Iocaste, and took the throne of the father he had recently murdered.

Though the sins were unconscious, the gods could pardon neither incest nor patricide. They sent plague and famine on the land and spurned the sacrifices of the people. Then the oracle said: ‘Banish from your midst the murderer of Laius.’ But who was this person? The old king had been killed long ago, in cloudy circumstances, at a crossroads far from home. The puzzled citizens called on the blind prophet Teiresias, begging him to help them. First, said the prophet, one of the Sown Men who had built the city must die for it. When he heard this, Menoeceus, father of Iocaste, threw himself from the walls.

‘Menoeceus has done well,’ Teiresias continued, ‘but it is not enough. There is another, a descendant of Cadmus, who has sinned deeply. Our king, Oedipus, though he does not know it, has killed his father and married his mother.’

Parts of this dreadful story were confirmed by Queen Merope in Corinth, and another part by the aged shepherd who had found the infant Oedipus on the mountain. When they learnt all this, and saw what they had done, Iocaste hanged herself and Oedipus put out his own eyes. Then in rags and ashes, with only his daughter, Antigone, to

guide him, Oedipus was driven from the gates of Thebes.

Banished by Creon, Oedipus cursed his own sons, Eteocles and Polynices, who watched him go without remorse, and wandered blindly away, led by faithful Antigone. Pursued by the avenging Furies who would not let him rest, he made many painful journeys until he came, tired and defeated, to Colonus in Attica. He was finished with life. At the grove of the Eumenides he made a final offering to the Furies and died, still hand in hand with sorrowful Antigone.

After the exile of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices agreed to share the throne, ruling alternately, a year at a time. But at the end of the first year Eteocles refused to give way to his brother. Polynices went to Argos in a rebellious frame of mind, married the daughter of King Adrastus, and started to plot against Thebes with the king's help.

Adrastus gathered a powerful war-party to force Eteocles from the throne. This alliance of champions was known as the Seven against Thebes. Only the prophet Amphiaraus stood back from the campaign, foreseeing blood, grief and eventual failure, until Polynices bribed his wife with the golden necklace that Hephaestus had made for Harmonia. Continually nagged by his wife with accusations of cowardice, Amphiaraus set out with reluctance, but first he ordered his sons to kill their mother, if he did not return, and then to take revenge themselves on the city of Thebes.

At the walls of Thebes, Tydeus, one of the Seven and a favourite of Athene, blew the herald's trumpet and issued the challenge to Eteocles. The seven generals took up position before the seven gates and the siege began. Inside the walls there was great fear until the blind prophet Teiresias prophesied a Theban victory if a prince of the royal house would sacrifice himself. Creon's son offered himself up, dying on the walls in full view of the enemy. But the Argives were not impressed. They attacked fiercely. One of the generals, Capaneus, scaled the walls, exulting that not even Zeus could stop him. In a moment, the skies split and Zeus struck him down with a thunderbolt. Tydeus, mortally wounded, begged Athene for help. Since he was her favourite she came quickly with an elixir of life but discovered him, raging like a rabid dog, eating the brains of his enemy Melanippus. The goddess turned on her heel and left him to die.

With the tide of war running against the Seven, and most of them dead, Polynices offered to settle the matter in single combat against Eteocles. Both were killed in the duel, leaving the Theban defenders triumphant. The army of the Seven scattered and fled. Amphiaraus drove his chariot away from the battlefield, but the earth opened and swallowed him. When King Adrastus saw that he alone had survived of the Seven, he mounted the winged horse Arion and flew in haste to Argos.

Thebes was saved, but at what price? Both princes lay dead and the care of the people was thrust once more into Creon's hands. He surveyed the ruined walls and desolate fields, feeling a burning resentment. Polynices had brought this on. He had brought the enemies of the state to destroy his own home. Neither he nor his confederates from Argos deserved burial. They were carrion fit only for crows and dogs.

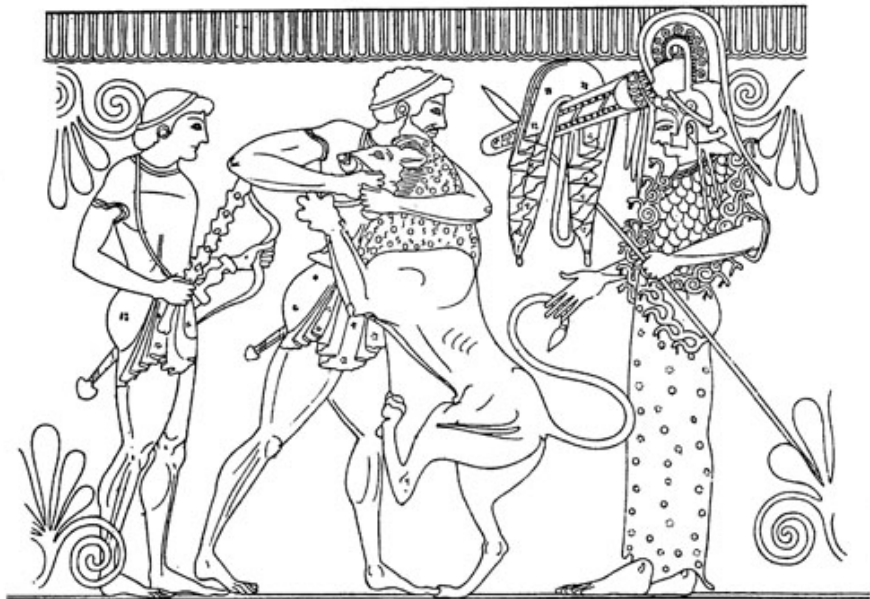
But when Antigone heard this sentence she turned pale. Unburied, Polynices was tied to this world forever, condemned to wander as a ghost without hope of the afterlife. So she took a little earth and sprinkled it on the corpse of her brother, lying among the gory mess of the slain, giving him a token burial, even though Polynices had turned his face against both his father and his people. She forgave him, for the needs of his soul were greater than his sins.

Mantes, the storyteller, thought about irreconcilable duties.

'Faithful to the gods? Or faithful to the homeland?' he mused. 'Unhappy Antigone. Even pious acts may have cruel consequences. The full weight of the state bore down on her. Creon condemned her to be entombed alive for disobeying his orders. Teiresias denounced this savagery, and Creon's son, Haemon, who loved Antigone, pleaded for her. Creon relented, but too late. When the rescuers rushed to the tomb, Haemon was dead by the door, and Antigone had hanged herself within.

'Creon had sinned. His zeal for Thebes overrode respect for sacred duty. Some retribution was inevitable for the city already hated by Ares. In Argos, the sons of the prophet Amphiaraus remembered their vow against Thebes. They were the Epigoni, the 'Later-Born', and they succeeded where their father had failed. They stormed the city and sacked it. They pulled down the walls and drove the survivors out into the wilderness. Time to begin again for the people of Thebes, time to send roots once more into the tenacious homeland, time to prove the value of being Greek.

'It is the web, the tangled web of love and duty that catches mankind. And who spins the web? The gods, only the gods.'



Heracles Kills the Lion

THE HERO OF THE GODS

When Amphitryon of Troezen returned from the wars he discovered that a god had occupied his marriage bed. It was another step into disaster. His life was unfortunate enough already. How was he to make sense of it?

Amphitryon was betrothed to Alcmene on the understanding that he would first help her father, Electryon, defeat the enemies of Mycenae. He was glad to do this. Beautiful Alcmene was a prize for any man. But before he could join the campaign he was the cause of a serious accident. While he was herding some cattle he threw his club at a stray cow. He missed the cow but hit and killed King Electryon. With family blood on his hands, Amphitryon took Alcmene and fled to Thebes.

Alcmene forgave him the accident and married him, but out of piety to her dead father she insisted that her husband should finish the war before he enjoyed the rites of marriage. After he had been away fighting for some time, one night, in the small secret hours, Alcmene felt a familiar presence by her bed.

‘Is it you, my husband?’ she murmured, sleepy and content.

‘It is I,’ answered the voice of Amphitryon, ‘come to claim the sweet rewards of the night. The door is closed. It is time to sow for the expected harvest.’

Then Zeus entered her bed in the form of Amphitryon. The King of the Gods had noted her and prepared for this time when she would be alone. He had ordered Helios to unhitch the horses of the sun and arrest the dawn. Darkness reigned and Selene, the moon, slipped slowly across the heavens in an extended night. In one night that was as long as three, Zeus brought comfort and ecstasy to Alcmene. There was great work to be done.

Hardly had Zeus departed, and nature resumed its expected course, when the real Amphitryon returned from the war. He was ready for the wedding bed. His success in the campaign had atoned for the unlucky death of his father-in-law. He was full of anecdotes and energy, and he came to his wife with joyous expectation. But Alcmene

was amazed and afraid. This moment had already been consummated. Can the gods duplicate time? Enfolding her husband in her puzzled arms, she did not know what to say. Later, when the prophet Teiresias told him that he had been cuckolded by a god, Amphitryon knew himself to be a victim – or beneficiary – of a divine scheme larger than human lives. Out of respect for Zeus, he no longer slept with his wife. But twice-gratified Alcmene had already conceived twins.

Often, when he related this story, Mantes wondered about the god's intention.

'This was no sudden whim,' he told himself, 'no outburst of passion such as All-Powerful Zeus had given way to on many other occasions. Alcmene was the most perfect and beautiful of womankind. Zeus had marked her as his own. He had a special destiny in store for her. After Alcmene, he lay with no other human. From her loins he intended to bring forth a glorious son, one who was no less than an intermediary between heaven and earth.'

Although Alcmene and Amphitryon submitted humbly to the will of Zeus, Hera, Queen of Heaven, was in no way reconciled to this latest example of her husband's infidelity. She knew that something quite extraordinary was in store, for when the time of delivery was close she heard Zeus make this oath: 'The child of my blood who is born to a mortal woman before this nightfall shall be lord of all the lands of Perseus.'

Now, Hera knew that the wife of Sthenelus of Tiryns – a king descended from Perseus and thus from Zeus and Danae – was also about to give birth. So she sent Eileithyia, Goddess of Childbirth, to sit with crossed legs in front of Alcmene; for no child could be born until the goddess opened her legs, and this she did not do until the infant Eurystheus was safely delivered in Tiryns. Then the restraint on Alcmene's womb was released and she gave birth to twin boys. The younger, by an hour, was named Iphicles and the elder at first was called Alceides, though later he became known as Heracles. This name, which means 'Glory of Hera', was perhaps an attempt to placate Zeus' angry consort. She was the enemy of Heracles and had already stolen part of his birthright and given it to Eurystheus.

At first, Amphitryon was in doubt as to which babe was his, and which the son of a god. When Heracles was eight months old, two large snakes slithered into the nursery. Some say that Hera sent them, and others that Amphitryon himself put them there, to test the children. His doubts were soon resolved, for while Iphicles bawled in terror Heracles calmly took a snake in each hand and strangled both of them.

Knowing now the prodigious and semi-divine nature of Heracles, Amphitryon gave the boy the very best instruction. He himself showed

Heracles the art of chariot-driving. Eurytus, a grandson of Apollo, taught him archery. The warrior Polydeuces taught him use of the sword, and Autolycus, master of tricks and sleight-of-hand, initiated him into the finer points of wrestling. Linus tried to teach him music but in this Heracles was a slow learner. When Linus corrected him, Heracles gave him such a blow with the lyre that he killed him. Heracles escaped punishment by pleading self-defence, quoting from a law of Rhadamanthys, but Amphitryon quickly sent him into the country, to work off his dangerous energy as guardian of flocks and herds.

This life suited him well. Alone, under stars by night and the burning sun by day, clothed only in a short tunic and sandals, Heracles perfected his skill with bow and spear. He learnt the ways of animals, and how to tell auguries by the movements of birds. Abstemious by day, drinking water from clear streaming springs, he feasted at evening, eating enough roast meat to satisfy a mountain lion. At night, he slept under the great roof of heaven. He grew to more than four cubits, as large and strong as any human. He was ready to prove himself.

When he was eighteen he went to Mount Cithaeron, to kill a lion that was preying on the countryside. On his way back, he turned aside to the notorious, loose court of King Thespius and in the exuberance of youth serviced the king's fifty daughters, some say in fifty nights, and some say in one.

'Be careful, Heracles,' his friends warned him. 'You overreach the powers of man.'

'Who cares?' he boasted in reply. 'The gods have made me thus. Whatever I will, I shall do.'

Then, returning to Thebes mightily refreshed, he fell in with the Minyan heralds from Orchomenus, coming to collect a tribute owed to their city by Thebes as the result of a recent war. Angry words were exchanged which put Heracles in such a rage that he cut off the noses and ears of the heralds and strung them around their necks.

'That's the only tribute you'll get from us,' he cried, and beat the Minyans homewards.

King Erginus of Orchomenus immediately declared war, but Heracles raised and trained an army of Theban youths. Then he ambushed and defeated Erginus. After this victory, he forced from the Minyans double the tribute that Thebes had formerly paid to Orchomenus. The Thebans were proud of their new hero. They raised a statue to Heracles, the Docker of Noses, and King Creon gave Heracles his daughter Megara in marriage. Heracles and Megara had children and for some years lived and prospered in Thebes.

'The early life of Heracles,' Mantes reflected, 'was a glorious

chapter, but also a lesson. When a man is a hero, and a favourite of Zeus, who shall govern him? He had molested and painfully wounded the Minyan heralds – those whose persons are supposed to be inviolate – yet he went unpunished. When anger clouded his eyes with blood he smote and killed without compunction. He defeated the Euboeans and tore their king apart between wild horses and dumped the blood-boltered carcass on the river-bank. Hera saw this, and saw the terror of all the lands around, and she remembered her enmity towards Heracles.’

Seeing brutality rampant and justice in despair, Hera afflicted Heracles with a fit of madness. In a homicidal rage he killed Megara and his children and even struck down two children of his brother, Iphicles. Only then did he come to his senses.

When he saw what he had done, Heracles went into a dark place and wept. Sorrowfully, he travelled to King Thespius, to undergo the purification prescribed by the gods for the letting of blood. Then he went to Delphi, to learn his fate from the Pythoness at the shrine of Apollo.

Calling him by the name of Heracles for the first time, the priestess told him: ‘You shall go in exile to Tiryns, to the court of Eurystheus, whom you shall serve for twelve years, doing whatever he demands from you. When you have done this, you will become immortal.’

Here was both a penance and a promise. But to serve Eurystheus, that mean-spirited king who had already stolen his birthright! And for twelve years! In dejection, Heracles collected himself for the journey. He wore a bronze breastplate made by Hephaestus and a cloak woven by Athene. He took the sword of Hermes and the bow of Apollo and strode towards Tiryns. On the way, to complete his armoury, he carved a gigantic club from a wild olive tree in Nemea. For Heracles, fancy weapons were hardly necessary. His club was enough.

King Eurystheus greeted the arrival of his new servant with dismay. He did not need this careless and overpowering presence to muddy the quiet waters of his life. The best he could do was to challenge Heracles with dangerous and inhospitable acts, and hope that Heracles might be killed in the process. From all the lands around him, he called to mind the largest variety of impossible tasks, and for his first labour sent Heracles to kill the Nemean lion.

This lion, an offspring of the monster Typhon, had a skin invulnerable to any weapon and an insatiable appetite. Heracles, taking with him his young nephew and friend Iolaus, tracked the lion to its cave high in the hills and attacked it with bow and sword. But arrows bounced from the beast like peas on a stone floor, and his sword grew blunt with the effort. Even blows from Heracles’ mighty club only drove the lion into its den. Throwing aside all weapons,

Heracles boldly followed, took the lion in a head-lock and strangled it to death.

Since no blade could pierce the pelt, to skin the animal Heracles used the lion's own razor-sharp claws. He dressed the skin and threw it over his shoulders as his own special cloak. The snarling skull fitted his own head like a helmet, and the impenetrable skin kept him safer than armour. In this savage costume, he returned to Eurystheus in triumph.

But the sight of Heracles terrified Eurystheus.

'What is that gruesome figure,' he asked his attendants, 'advancing on us in such a menacing way?'

'Sire, the paths are empty and the children hide because it is Heracles dressed in the skin of the Nemean lion.'

'Let the gates be closed instantly,' cried the king in a panic. 'Life is much safer with Heracles outside the walls. Is it just for the gods to frighten me with this unruly servitor? In future I shall talk to him only from a distance, through a herald.'

And for greater security Eurystheus buried in the ground a large bronze jar into which he could jump whenever he saw Heracles bringing home yet another fearful prize.

But the king felt safest of all when Heracles was far from Tiryns, and so he quickly thought of the second labour, which was to rid the land of the Hydra who lived in the marshes and quicksands of Lerna. This desolate seaside tract, sacred to Demeter and Dionysus, was terrorized by a swamp-creature with the body of a huge dog and nine snake-like heads, of which the middle one was immortal. The monster was venomous, so poisonous that not only its breath but even its body smell could kill.

Again taking Iolaus with him, Heracles chased the beast from the swamp with burning arrows and then, holding his breath, set about the nine heads with his brutal club. But as each head was struck off a new one grew, as angry and venomous as the one before. And while Heracles was tangling with the heads, his enemy Hera sent a giant crab to attack him from the rear. Heracles stamped on the crab, crushing it underfoot. Then he shouted to Iolaus to bring a burning torch, to cauterize the necks of the Hydra and prevent new heads from growing. The last head, the immortal one, he cut off with a golden sickle and buried it deep in the ground. When the Hydra was dead, he opened the body and took the gall from the gall bladder, to use as a deadly poison for the tips of his arrows.

When Heracles returned and the herald shouted through the gates the story of the triumph over the Hydra, Eurystheus was not impressed.

'Iolaus helped you,' he complained from within the bronze jar. That

was not our agreement. This labour can hardly count. Now, away with you at once, and bring me the Hind of Ceryneia.'

This wild, dappled deer could not be killed, for it was sacred to Artemis, Goddess of Hunting. With bronze hooves and graceful golden horns it lived free on the mountain pastures, so swift that it left the wind behind. Heracles gave chase, following it doggedly for a year, from the Peloponnese to the land of the Hyperboreans. Easily, the hind outran him but he would not give up. At last, by the River Ladon, he surprised the deer while it slept. He tied the feet fast, threw the animal lightly over his shoulder and set off for home. But Artemis, travelling that way with her twin, Apollo, met him and angrily wanted to know what he was doing with her sacred hind. Adroitly, Heracles laid the blame on Eurystheus and the goddess allowed him to continue, on condition that he let it go when he reached Tiryns.

The pursuit of the Ceryneian Hind had been an invigorating and zestful chase. But the fourth labour, the capture of the Erymanthian Boar, caused Heracles much trouble and regret. On his way to the wooded slopes of Mount Erymanthus, in Arcadia, Heracles stopped to rest at the home of the Centaur Pholus. Pholus entertained his guest well, with roast meat for Heracles and raw meat for himself, but he was reluctant to open a flask of wine because to do so would attract the other Centaurs, who owned the wine communally. And strong drink was known to make Centaurs violent. But Heracles would not be denied. He had travelled far and he was parched. Who could withstand the will of Heracles, specially when the hero was a guest? Pholus opened the wine and the other Centaurs smelt it at once. Already enraged, they attacked Pholus' cave with rocks and flaming brands and uprooted trees.

Indignantly, Heracles struck back with a volley of arrows, sending the horse-like creatures galloping towards the home of Cheiron, their king. Although Heracles had the greatest respect for the learning and wisdom of Cheiron, unfortunately one of his arrows hit the king in the knee. The wound was hardly more than a glance, but the arrow was tipped with the Hydra's gall and Cheiron could not escape the agony of the poison. Though he was immortal, he longed to die and at last chose to do so, voluntarily giving up his immortality. Nor was that the only misfortune. While Pholus was burying the other victims of Heracles' arrows, he also gashed himself on a poisoned tip and died instantly. Heracles buried his friend with full honours and was glad to leave the unlucky place.

After these difficulties, the capture of the boar was a simple matter. Raising a great din with roars and shouts and the clash of weapons, Heracles frightened the boar from its lair and drove it high into the peaks of Erymanthus until at last it floundered into a snowdrift and

was stuck. Heracles jumped on its back and bound it fast. Then he heaved the huge beast on his shoulders and took the homeward road.

But when Eurystheus saw the captive animal, with its coat of bristles like a thorn bush, its tusks as curved and sharp as sickles, and its slobbering angry snout, he took one look and leapt for the safety of his bronze jar.

At Elis in Arcadia, Eurystheus had a neighbour called King Augeias, a son of Helius. Like his father the sun-god, Augeias possessed very many cattle – some say he had the largest herd in the world – and his animals were healthy and fertile and multiplied fruitfully, so that the care of this vast number quite overwhelmed the king and his herdsmen. The stockyards and the stables overflowed with dung. The noisome stench raised a pestilence in the land and the run-off into the fields prevented ploughing and sowing.

The clearing of this foul mess was a particularly unpleasant task which Eurystheus gladly imposed on Heracles as his fifth labour.

Heracles sized up the task and offered to cleanse yards and stables before nightfall, in return for a tenth of the cattle. Augeias laughed at this folly but quickly sealed the offer with an oath. With the help of Iolaus, Heracles made breaches in the walls surrounding the cattle, then he diverted the rivers Alpheius and Peneius into these gaps and watched the rushing waters sweep the yards clean well before nightfall. Suddenly the air was sweet once more, and the night birds called for the first time in as long as people could remember.

Heracles claimed his reward in cattle, but Augeias refused to pay on the grounds that not he but the two river-gods had done the work. He sent Heracles empty-handed back to Tiryns where Eurystheus was waiting with more carping criticism.

‘Another mark against you, servant,’ the king sneered from behind the gates. ‘You tried to work for payment, and once more Iolaus helped you. This labour does not count. Do better now, and rid our lands of the Stymphalian Birds.’

The brackish marsh of Stymphalus, set amid dense woods in Arcadia, was the home of a large flock of man-eating birds. These birds, which migrated from Arabia, were like cranes but had brazen feathers. They attacked in swarms and their beaks were strong enough to pierce a breastplate. Hidden in the thick woods or out of reach on the marsh, they were safe from humans and Heracles was puzzled how to reach them. As he pondered the problem Athene came to him with a large metal rattle and told him to place himself on a mound by the shore and shake the rattle with all his strength. When they heard the noise the birds rose in panic. With his unerring bow, Heracles shot as fast as he could take aim and killed many. The rest flew away to the Black Sea where they settled on an island sacred to Ares.

By now, Heracles had cleared the Peloponnese of its greatest dangers and Eurystheus had to scratch his head to find further test for his heroic servant. He would have to go abroad. For the seventh labour, he sent Heracles to capture the Cretan Bull.

Crete was renowned for its bulls, from that first moment when Zeus, in the form of a bull, had landed on the island with Europa on his back. No one is sure which bull Eurystheus had in mind, but most agree that Heracles captured Poseidon's bull from the sea, the one that serviced Pasiphae and fathered the Minotaur. Heracles grappled with it, and tamed it, and rode it back to Eurystheus. Some say that the King offered the bull to Hera, but the vindictive goddess would have nothing to do with a sacrifice provided by Heracles. Others say that the bull was simply released. This was unfortunate. The bull, which was angry and violent, went rampaging across the land even as far as Marathon, where Theseus was forced to subdue it and drag it as a sacrifice to Athene.

The next task, to tame the horses of Diomedes, took Heracles even further afield, to the far wastes of Thrace.

Diomedes, King of the Bistones, kept his horses tethered with stout chains and fed them human flesh. For this, enemies taken in war were useful, but a guest would do as well. Heracles, expecting a struggle, raised a band of helpers and sailed to Thrace. Then he struck suddenly, raiding the stables at dawn, surprising the grooms, and driving out the vicious horses with swords and spears rather than with whips and bridles. When the king and his soldiers came in pursuit, Heracles left young Abderus to guard the horses and turned to face the enemy. He and his friends routed the pursuers, and having stunned Diomedes with a formidable blow he dragged the king away with him. But when he returned to the horses he found that they had attacked and eaten Abderus. Heracles buried his companion on the spot that later became the city of Abdera. Then he took hold of Diomedes in disgust and threw him to his own horses.

After driving the horses with much difficulty back to the Argolid, Heracles discovered Eurystheus in his usual contrary frame of mind. No, he did not want these horses. They were far too savage and dangerous. So he just let them go, as he had done with the bull from Crete. But the horses, raised on the grasslands of the north and feeding on flesh, could not thrive in the Peloponnese. They wandered into the mountains and soon became prey to wolves and lions.

Now Eurystheus said to Heracles, 'I can see that you're a bold fellow against beasts and monsters, and you hack down men like summer weeds, but let us see how you fare against women. Fetch me the golden girdle of Hippolyte, the Amazon Queen.'

Heracles did not underestimate this labour. The Amazon women,

who lived by the stormy banks of the River Thermodon on the shores of the Black Sea, were descended from Ares, a race of warriors who despised peace and lived only for war. They crippled their men and set them to work in the house, while they cut off the right breast – it was this that gave them their name – to give themselves more freedom to draw the bow-string. The female arts, decorous and soft and langorous, were not for them. They wore rough skins, carried a shield like a half-moon, and were expert with a short bow, reinforced with horn and brass. They were fierce and tenacious fighters.

To face them, Heracles had gathered another band of hardy soldiers. After several adventures on the way, the ship sailed into Themiscyra where Heracles was surprised to find Queen Hippolyte waiting for him, not only friendly but positively amorous. Infatuated with the person and reputation of the hero, she was ready for a struggle in arms of another kind and gladly offered her girdle as a token of love. But Hera, always the antagonist of Heracles, frowned at this peaceful intent. She went in disguise among the Amazons spreading the rumour that Heracles was about to abduct their queen. The Amazons rushed to arms and attacked, but Heracles and his allies beat them back. Suspecting that Hippolyte herself had planned this attack, Heracles killed her without compunction, ripped the girdle from her body and sailed hurriedly beyond range of the Amazon missiles.

Held back by the winds in the northern Aegean, Heracles landed for food and water at Troy and found the city in great distress. Some years before, Apollo and Poseidon had built a wall to protect Troy but King Laomedon had foolishly withheld their payment. This rankled with the gods. Apollo afflicted the people with a plague and Poseidon, ever the more brutal, sent a sea-monster to destroy the city. Laomedon soon saw the error of his ways, and at the time when Heracles arrived the king was staking out his daughter Hesione on the shore, as a sacrifice to the monster. In this way, he hoped to placate the angry gods and save the city.

To Heracles, a maiden in jeopardy was an occasion for heroic acts. Why else had All-Seeing Zeus brought him into the world? Immediately, he offered to rescue Hesione if her father would give him in return the wonderful horses that Zeus had once presented to Troy. The king agreed and Heracles killed the monster by jumping down its throat and hacking it with his sword from within the belly. But rash Laomedon, who made a habit of breaking promises, refused to hand over the horses. Heracles was enraged, but with the wind turning he had no time to spare. He was in a rush to complete his service to Eurystheus. So he laid a curse on Laomedon and on Troy and sailed quickly away.

After several years, and nine labours, Heracles had faced

unflinchingly the terrors and the hazards of the world. He had been to the limit of the lands of the gods, where the barbarians roam, and he had survived. Now Eurystheus sent him further, to the shadowlands where nature and the supernatural mixed, to places where a human cannot enter without fear and trembling.

On the island of Erytheia, in the western stream of Oceanus, the monster Geryon kept a herd of red cattle. Geryon himself was formidable enough, having three bodies and three heads, but to guard his cattle he was also helped by the watch-dog Orthrus, a two-headed brother of Cerberus, the hell-hound. For his tenth labour, Heracles was ordered to steal the red cattle.

As he journeyed west to the edge of the world, Heracles was hemmed in by the narrow strait that separated Asia from Europe. Wishing to make room for a safer passage he set his shoulders to the continents and thrust them apart, marking the new sea-way with two large rocks that are called the Pillars of Heracles. As he was sweating and straining to push the lands apart he became annoyed that the bright beams of Helius were burning him so fiercely. In a flash of temper he loosed an arrow at the sun, but Helius was so amused at this attempt at the impossible – as if a mere human could stop the sun's chariot with a puny arrow! – that he gave Heracles a golden bowl, in which it was safe to sail on Oceanus to the isle of Erytheia.

When he landed, Heracles felled the dog Orthrus with a mighty blow of his club. But Geryon, a descendant of the Titans, fought strongly and was not defeated until Heracles transfixes his three bodies with a single arrow. Then he herded the cattle into the golden bowl and sailed back to the shores of mankind.

He had stolen the cattle but now he had to drive them home to Eurystheus. The journey was not easy. The red cattle, unused to humans, were almost uncontrollable. Bandits waylaid the herd, waiting for strays. In Liguria, Heracles spent all his arrows beating off the Ligyes and had to pray to Zeus for help. The Thunderer directed him into a plain of stones where he found plenty of ammunition to sling at the raiders. But slowly the herd was diminishing. At Rhegium in Italy, a bull broke away and swam to Sicily, forcing Heracles to swim after it and wrestle the king of the land for its return. From Italy the herd ran north, but before Heracles could turn the cattle towards the Peloponnese, Hera sent a cloud of gadflies that stampeded them into Thrace. Many slipped from mountain paths, or fell into ravines and were killed. Others broke away into the wilderness and were lost. After months of hard travelling Heracles reached the Argolid with only a few lean and foot-sore animals. He had no use for these skeletons and sacrificed them to Hera in a vain attempt to appease his greatest enemy.

By now, Heracles had served Eurystheus for eight years and one month. He had completed ten labours and had reason to hope for his release from bondage. Eurystheus, however, was still quibbling about two of the tasks and was not prepared to remit one moment of the sentence. Far from showing generosity, the king was planning a labour of malicious cunning, which would send Heracles into the territory of the gods. Eurystheus ordered him to go to the Garden of the Hesperides and bring back the golden apples that Ge had given to Hera as a wedding gift.

No human had been to the Garden. It was said to lie far to the west, on the lower slopes of Mount Atlas, near the night-pastures where the sun-god's horses took their rest. Ladon, the hundred-headed dragon, guarded the apples, coiled unsleeping around the apple tree. Heracles set out hopefully, but he did not know the road. He walked at random, questioning all the travellers he met. Some were helpful and some were not. In Macedonia he was drawn into a quarrel with a son of Ares and might have killed him had not Zeus separated them with a thunderbolt. Further on, at a lucky encounter by the River Eridanus, he came across Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea, asleep in the mild sun. He got a grip on the slippery old sea-god and held on grimly while Nereus changed from one bewildering shape to another, until at last he forced the Old Man to reveal the way to the Garden.

Though Heracles now knew his destination, his steps were still wayward, for the geography of the world was a troubling science to mankind, and very few travellers had been far enough even to say what was over the next hill. Heracles veered south and north, though all the time he was trying to bear to the west. He was stopped often by the challenges or the injustice of the world. Passing through Libya, he found Antaeus in his path, a giant who liked to wrestle travellers to the death. Heracles prepared for the contest, rubbing his body with oil. But Antaeus poured hot sand over head and shoulders. When they began to grapple, and the giant was thrown to the ground, he rebounded every time stronger than before, since Earth was his mother and he gained strength from each contact with her. When Heracles realized this, he jerked Antaeus off the ground, held him high and crushed him to death. In Egypt, Heracles barely escaped with his life from King Busiris, who was looking for a stranger to sacrifice to Zeus, in order to end an eight-year famine.

Still Heracles could not find the best route. He went through Rhodes, where his theft of a cow made later men use a curse when they sacrificed to Heracles himself. Going on through Asia Minor into the Caucasus he stumbled on the tragic figure of Prometheus, still chained to the rock, with the vulture still tearing daily at his liver. After prayers to his father, Zeus, Heracles was permitted to shoot the

vulture and cut free the champion of mankind. He had suffered enough for his disrespect of the gods. Then Heracles offered him, again by the grace of Zeus, the immortality which the Centaur Cheiron had renounced.

Wandering on through the icy storms of the Hyperboreans, Heracles at last knew that the end was in sight. He saw the sky-bearing figure of Atlas looming gigantic on the last foothold of the land. Heracles felt now that the apples of the Hesperides were almost in his hand, for he could see them gleaming in the declining light as Helius drove the setting sun into the stream of Oceanus. It was a simple matter to collect his prize, to shoot Ladon with a poisoned arrow, to pick the apples and go on his way. But others say that he could not touch the apples, which were beyond the reach of a mere human, and that he turned to Atlas for help, shouldering the sky while the Titan plucked the fruit for him. But then Atlas was free. He sighed and stretched his arms and smiled once more.

‘Now, at last,’ he said with overwhelming relief, ‘I am free of that burden. Now I permit you to carry the sky!’

‘Well and good,’ replied cunning Heracles, ‘you deserve your rest. But here, the weight frets me a little on the left shoulder. Just take the load for a moment while I settle myself more comfortably.’ The unsuspecting Titan agreed. With a laugh and hardly a backward glance Heracles took the apples and went on his way.

But the apples were the property of the gods and Eurystheus could not keep them. Their theft had been permitted, to test the ingenuity and power of Heracles, as a part of his penance, and then Hera demanded their return. Athene collected them and took them back to their rightful place in the Garden of the Hesperides.

The time of your release grows near,’ said Eurystheus to his heroic servant with grudging respect. ‘You have overcome the dangers of the earth and even ventured onto the foothills of divine territory. Now I shall put you to the greatest test of all. For your last labour, you must brave the Underworld and bring me the dog Cerberus from Tartarus.’

Such an undertaking could not be done without the help of the gods. Heracles prayed for assistance from Athene and Hermes. On his way to Taenarum, where a cleft in the rock formed one of the gates to hell, he stopped at Eleusis, to atone for the blood of the Centaurs and to be initiated into the Mysteries of Demeter. Then, with Athene and Hermes to guide him, he entered the realm of Hades.

In the black gloom Heracles – even he! – reached for Athene’s hand. He was menaced by shadows. The shade of Medusa ghosted by. The pale form of Meleager raised an arm, but only to warn Heracles of his own approaching death and to offer the hero his sister Deianeira in marriage. Theseus and Peirithous called out from the Seat of

Forgetfulness, begging to be released. Heracles strained all his strength to pull Theseus free, but Peirithous, whose sins were great, was left to suffer. And when, in the Fields of Asphodel, the shades clamoured around him with beseeching looks, Heracles slaughtered one of Hades' cattle, so that the shades might drink the blood they craved.

In the deepest hall of Tartarus, Hades waited, grimly amused. He agreed to let Cerberus go, but only if Heracles could capture the dog with his bare hands. With Athene's advice Heracles mastered the dog and dragged it across the Styx and into the light of day by way of the chasm of Troezen. All the way to the Argolid the beast struggled and howled, its three heads scattering saliva from which sprang poisonous aconites.

When Eurystheus saw what kind of a monster Heracles had brought him this time, he went white with terror and sent Cerberus straight back to Tartarus.

What difference did twelve years of servitude make to the greatest of heroes? The character of Heracles had been set from the moment of maturity. He was all of a piece. Out of him poured passion, sentiment, unthinking generosity, egotism, violence, vast acts of the will. It was as hard to stand in his path as to roll back the sea.

'He either saved you or damned you,' Mantes chuckled to himself, 'and the one was just as likely to be painful as the other.'

Even the gods could barely hold him in check, and then only through the corrective of divine punishment.

When Eurystheus released him after his years of labour, Heracles returned to Thebes with undiminished energy, knowing that his only purpose in life was to express fully the extraordinary nature granted him by his father, Zeus. Some say that Megara was waiting for him, having survived his earlier homicidal fit, but that Heracles, unable to face the memory and guilt of his own madness, divorced her and then married her to his faithful nephew Iolaus. In any case, he was soon in the hunt for another wife, going to Oechalia to compete at archery for the hand of Iole, daughter of King Eurytus.

Heracles won the prize but the king, recalling the unhappy story of Megara, refused to honour the agreement. When angry words were exchanged, and then there was a further misunderstanding over some stolen cattle, Heracles took hold of Iole's brother Iphitus and hurled him from the walls of Tiryns. This time, no king would purify his rash and bloody hands. Even the Pythoness at Delphi, horrified by his murderous lack of control, turned him away from the holy oracle. Then Heracles threatened to destroy the shrine, stole the sacred tripod

of the priestess and, when Apollo himself intervened, began to wrestle with the god, until Zeus parted them with a thunderbolt. Such a sacrilegious outrage was too much for heaven to overlook. Through the mouth of the priestess, Zeus condemned his favourite son to three more years of slavery.

Since there was now no great competition among the courts of mankind to accept Heracles as a servant, Hermes, God of Trade and Commerce, was told to make the best bargain he could. After some haggling Omphale, the widowed Queen of Lydia, agreed to take Heracles at a price. They were well matched, queen and servant. The witty, easy-going queen understood how best to handle Heracles' overbearing nature. She put his brutal energy to work in the cause of justice, and he found a place for his boisterous humour in the wiles and surprises of her oriental court.

His three years of service in Lydia was a chapter of odd events. Once, he woke to find his goods being rifled by a couple of small, light-fingered rogues called the Cercopes. Heracles seized them and trussed them like fowl for the pot, then he hung them head down from each end of a pole and carried them away. But the little men then had an unusual view of the hero's bottom, which was hardly covered by the lionskin. When Heracles heard the sound of their laughter he stopped to find the cause. The Cercopes explained the joke and then all three of them lay by the road, laughing so hard and long that they could not continue the journey. On other occasions, when Heracles was not taking the field to fight the queen's enemies, he was likely to be indulging her fantasies at home, changing clothes with her, or elbowing her handmaidens in the household chores. And at night, queen and hero joined together to satisfy each other in bed.

When the three years were up, Omphale and Heracles parted with good wishes and with pleasant memories of affection. Heracles left Lydia. He had old scores to settle. Both Laomedon of Troy and Augeias of Elis had broken promises to redeem, and Heracles was not the man to forget. First, he sailed to Troy with a powerful force of eighteen ships. With his Greek army he besieged the city, breached the walls and killed King Laomedon together with all but two of his sons. Podarces, later called Priam, survived and thus had good reason to remember in years to come the fury of Greeks. Next, Heracles turned on Augeias. The king who had refused Heracles the payment of cattle for the cleansing of his stables now paid for that miscalculation with his life. In this warlike mood Heracles swept on across the Peloponnese like an incalculable storm, dealing rough justice with his own well-blooded hands and making kings and princes quake in fear.

This fierce joy in war lasted for some time. Then, tired of slaughter, Heracles turned to softer thoughts and remembered the promise that

Meleager had made him in Tartarus. He went to Calydon to seek out Deianeira. He wooed her, fighting off the competition of the river-god Achelous, and won her. Heracles married Deianeira and for a time they lived peacefully and happily, producing a son and a daughter. But then, in a moment of familiar anger, Heracles struck out and killed a young servant who had spilt wine on the table. Once more, he took his family on the doleful road to exile.

As they were travelling towards Trachis, the Centaur Nessus offered to carry Deianeira on his broad horse's back over the rushing spring waters of the River Evenus. Going on ahead, Heracles was just pulling himself up the far bank when he heard the cries of his wife, about to disappear into the trees with the galloping centaur. Heracles drew his bow and felled the centaur with a long shot. As Nessus lay wounded, expecting an inevitable death from the poisoned arrow, he told Deianeira to fill a small flask with his blood, to use on Heracles as a love potion if he ever grew tired of her.

Time passed and Deianeira had cause to wonder. Her husband had set out once more on a trail of vengeance, to punish Eurytus for denying him the hand of his daughter Iole. Deianeira heard that Eurytus was dead and that Heracles was returning with Iole as his concubine. This news she had from Lichas whom Heracles had sent on to fetch a ceremonial robe which Heracles intended to wear when he sacrificed to Zeus in thanks for the victory. When she heard about Iole, Deianeira felt that her husband's heart was stealing away from her and she remembered the words of Nessus. She spread on the robe the blood of Nessus and sent it to Heracles.

But the blood of the dead centaur, which was mixed with the Hydra's gall from the tip of the arrow, was a corrosive poison, not a love potion, and when Heracles put on the robe it burnt him to the bone. In an agony of rage he seized Lichas and hurled the unlucky messenger far out to sea. With his skin on fire he knew that death was close and remembered the old saying of an oracle, that no living person could kill him but that he would die by the hand of the dead. He ordered his friends and his son Hyllus to carry him to Mount Oeta in Thessaly. He was ready for the end. When Deianeira learnt what she had done, she forestalled revenge from husband or son and hanged herself.

Coming painfully to Mount Oeta, Heracles took Hyllus aside and gave his last orders: 'On the summit of this mountain make me a pyre of oak and olive wood. Then, resolutely and without tears, burn me.' When the pyre was built Heracles spread his lionskin over it and lay down with his mighty club as a pillow. But still he could not die, for no one had the courage to light the funeral flames. At last, a passing shepherd offered to do so and received in return for this kindness the

bow and the quiver of the hero. As the flames mounted and began to consume the human part of Heracles, the skies opened and his father Zeus threw down a thunderbolt and a shaft of lightning which split the pyre and released Heracles into the immortality of heaven, as the Delphic oracle had long ago foretold.

I used to say with a kind of reverent criticism, 'Superhuman power is not safe unless it is tempered by divinity. Heracles did many good things in our world. He eradicated monsters, killed tyrants, made roads safe and cities secure. Often, the poor and the weak had reason to bless him. But many innocents were destroyed by the whirlwind of his actions. Mere insects in his path, lesser humans were crushed by his bold, unthinking steps.

'He is better employed in heaven, as the immortal gatekeeper to the court of Olympus and the husband of Hebe the wine-bearer. With what eagerness does he await the daily return of Artemis, the Huntress. How gladly he inspects the results of the chase, anticipating the evening feast. There's good fellowship in the halls of Olympus! And nothing can make Heracles forget his appetite!'



A Goddess with Two Warriors

THE VOYAGERS

THE SAILOR could see that Mantes was nervous. Mantes admitted it. Secretly, he hated the sea. But he could not admit to hatred. He suspected that it was disreputable for a Greek to think in that way. For Greeks, the sea was a familiar companion. Turbulent or serene, it was an inescapable part of their elemental world. One may approach it with a certain caution or nervousness, but hatred was another matter.

The prospect of a sea voyage filled Mantes with ill-disguised apprehension. He feared not just the chance of shipwreck or drowning. No, he also dreaded the giddiness of nausea, the painful retching, the hammer-blows of sick headache, the unbearable loss of equilibrium. Even when the motion was smooth enough to avoid sickness he found much to abominate in the salty confines of shipboard life. Damp sea air sent shooting pains through his lame leg. In the mornings he was so stiff he could barely move, dragging himself by the rigging from bulwark to bulwark. As for the accommodation, prisoners were better lodged. Wind and spray scoured open boats. The cabin – when there was one – was stuffed with musty barrels, sodden cordage, spoilt cargoes, nameless rotting things, all shot through with the smell of unwashed bodies. It was hard to face the cold, dismal food, the spray-blown nights, the growls of the sailors contemptuous of all mere passengers.

But what was he to do? Service of the Muses took him to wherever Greek was spoken. Yearly, he set out for remote lands – Thrace, Phrygia, Mysia, Lydia, Caria, all the kingdoms of the Ionian shore. He had visited Crete and Cyprus and had been battered amid the islands of the Ionian Sea. He had peeped into the Black Sea. He had fumbled down the eastern sea-coast to Egypt and gratefully hurried back again. Once, in a voyage of surprising blissful ease, under the softest of breezes, he had been as far as Sicily.

Today, for the time being all was well. At Chalcis in Euboea, Mantes had boarded a trading vessel bound for the Troad and then on to the southern ports of the Black Sea. His own destination was the shrine of the Great Gods on the island of Samothrace, but he was tied to no

itinerary and no timetable. Greek mariners went where the wind blew and hung to the coast like babes at a mother's breast. Mantes was prepared to stop off wherever the whim of the sea might land him. But that decision was far away. They were still in the long sea-channel between Euboea and the mainland, passing so close to the shore that the ship seemed to drift in a sea, not of blue, but of green and grey and brown. The weather was kind.

Perhaps Mantes' gaze was too wistful as he leant on the rail and scanned the solid landscape.

'No cause for worry,' the sailor assured him cheerfully, setting his elbows down next to him. 'This is the best time for a voyage, just after the spring equinox. The leaf on the new shoots of the fig tree is no larger than a crow's foot. That's the moment to take the boat off the blocks and run it down to the sea. With luck we'll be home before the grapes are harvested, when Notus, the South Wind, sends his gales and the Thunderer wrings a downpour out of miserable clouds. Of course, trade means money and money means life to poor mortals, so unwary men will sail at any time, even when Earth-Shaking Poseidon bares his teeth in angry winter. But now Zephyrus is befriending us. There's no danger here.'

'So you know these waters well?' Mantes asked.

'I am a Minyan, from the Gulf of Pagasae. From childhood, this was my playground. Our people came from the sea, none knows when. We are wedded to water by our history. This is where great voyages begin. From our land, the Golden Fleece was sent to Colchis. From our city of Iolcus, Jason went to bring it back. That much I know, though the details of the story are a muddle to a mere seafarer. But look, poet, we are here entering into your territory. The day is calm, the passage is easy, there's time on our hands. Ease your nerves, settle your stomach, and tell me the true history of those events.'

T Athamas had two children, Phrixus and Helle. But the children grew up under a step-mother, Ino, who hated them and plotted to get rid of them. Ino told the countrywomen to roast the seedcorn before it was sown, so that the next year's crop would fail. When this happened, and Athamas sent to Delphi to learn the meaning of the disaster, Ino bribed the messenger to bring back a false message: 'The land will be barren unless you sacrifice your son, Phrixus.'

Now, the gods noted this abuse of the oracle. They were angry, and Zeus most of all, because he also disapproved of human sacrifice. At the last moment, even as Athamas lifted the sacrificial knife, Zeus sent a golden ram to rescue the children. Phrixus and Helle jumped on the

back of the ram and clung to the golden fleece as the ram bounded away to the east. In a few blinks of an eye the ram sped through Macedonia and Thrace, but when it made a great leap over the narrow sea that divides Europe from Asia it caused Helle to lose her grip. She fell and drowned in the strait now called the Hellespont. But the ram ran on, carrying Phrixus along the southern edge of the Black Sea to Colchis, the dawn-land in the east near the stables of the sun. King Aeetes, a son of Helius, recognized the ram as a godsend and received Phrixus with the greatest kindness and solemnity. The ram, its task complete, was sacrificed to Zeus and its wonderful skin was fixed to an oak in a grove sacred to Ares, where a dragon kept guard. The ram's skin was the Golden Fleece.

Some years later, in the Minyan town of Iolcus in Thessaly, Pelias usurped the throne from his step-brother, Aeson. This usurper, like many of his kind, ruled with cruelty and suspicion. He feared the family of Aeson in particular, since an oracle had warned him to beware of a one-sandalled man of Aeson's blood. When Aeson learnt of the danger to his family, and saw the king's soldiers making enquiries with swords in their hands, he sent his little son Jason to safety on Mount Pelion where the wise old Centaur Cheiron looked after him.

Cheiron taught Jason well. When the youth came to manhood he was eager for his place in the world. He set out for Iolcus in time for a festival in honour of Poseidon. But Pelias, anxious to satisfy Poseidon, had neglected Hera, and she was not pleased. Disguised as an old woman, the goddess waited for Jason by a brawling stream and begged him to carry her across. But in mid-stream she grew so unnaturally heavy that Jason stumbled and lost his left sandal. He was young and fit and bred on the mountain pastures, and this slight nuisance did not delay him. Without a pause he walked on to Iolcus, to confront the king and to claim his rightful inheritance.

When Pelias saw the bold young man with only one sandal and heard his demands, he remembered the oracle and became afraid. The king was old now and his arm had lost its force. Old tyrannies were forgotten. He wanted peace, not insurrection or blood feud. He thought of a way to buy time and to distract this youth with the intoxication of a dangerous adventure.

'This unhappy land,' the old king sighed, 'lies under the curse of Phrixus. His restless spirit lies far from home, banished to the distant place where the Golden Fleece is kept. Bring back the Fleece, appease the shade of Phrixus, and lift the burden of the curse from our shoulders. Then you shall have the kingship.'

The king was sad and old and hardly worth a blow. Moreover, the great adventure was an inescapable challenge. Jason agreed to fetch

the Golden Fleece.

What did the task need? First, a ship equal to the demands of strange seas, and then a band of great-hearted companions. Argus, the Thespian, built the ship at Pagasae, using close-grained timber grown high on Mount Pelion. It was a ship of fifty oars, the largest yet made by mankind. Athene fixed in the prow a billet of wood cut from Zeus' sacred oak at Dodona, which could speak with the voice of the oracle. Then the ship was named the *Argo* and hauled to the water.

When the ship was ready, heralds went to every part of the land, inviting young heroes to test themselves against unknown Fate. They came forward readily. Tiphys, the great navigator, was the helmsman and he was aided by eagle-eyed Lynceus in the lookout post. The rest of the crew were all mighty men and it was a puzzle who should lead them. Heracles was the natural choice, but that capricious hero waved the offer aside, conscious of too many other important occasions pressing on his time. So votes were taken and Jason was chosen. As the light faded Jason sacrificed two oxen to Apollo, God of Departures, and then the Argonauts feasted, growing hot and boastful until Orpheus, the great poet and peacemaker of the crew, soothed them to sleep with music.

In the dawn, as the disc of Helius climbed over the Magnesian headland, the Argonauts settled on the benches two by two. They strained into the rhythm of the oars and left Pagasae behind.

Mantes paused and the sailor took up the story.

'Ah, what a moment, that first clean break into the morning light, into the arms of our Aegean! It is the taste of a new world. A new sky, a freshness in the wind, an urgency in the ripple of the water. The huge shapes of the mainland mountains, hugged by mist, fall behind and the sun begins to caress the islands, our multitudinous islands, set like a necklace of flowers dropped in the silver flashes of the sea. And the birds hover and swoop and squall over the moving ship, waving you away with incoherent cries, both encouraging and fearful. Slowly, the islands of the Dolopes drop astern. Scyros is off the starboard bow. On lonely beaches lean boats lie atilt, nuzzling into the land. Behind, a bridle path mounts through a harsh tangle of rocks into grey hills strewn with a few patches of green. Here and there the small white cube of a house rests amid terraced fields, garlanded with fig trees, or the blooms of the oleander, or a trellised vine. The houses are white, dazzling white in the rising sun. Even the flagstones of the courtyard are edged with whitewash. They are like beacons marking the steps on the roadless seas, through which we Greeks will always move towards discovery and hope.'

While the sailor was talking, suddenly Mantes felt a quiver under his feet. His ship had swung east, passed Larissa, and settled into the

swell of the open sea. The wind was picking up, small plumes of spray were whipped from the hurrying wavelets. From the deck, the receding land appeared to roll slightly.

‘What is our course now?’ Mantes asked with faint beginnings of unease.

‘Where the Argonauts led, we follow. Northeast to Lemnos.’ And the sailor turned his happy face to the expectant sea.

When, after a fair passage, the Argonauts came to Lemnos, they were surprised to be greeted by the angry scowls of armed women. No men were in sight. Echion, the herald, went first ashore with the staff of peace and discovered that the women were expecting a raid from Thrace. Some time before, the women of Lemnos had been very indolent in matters of love, which offended Aphrodite so much that she afflicted them with a grievous stench. Their husbands, unable to bear the stink, went to Thrace for sweeter-smelling partners, but when the men returned with their concubines the wives waylaid them and killed them all, men and girls. Now they feared Thracian vengeance.

As soon as the Argonauts made clear their peaceful intention, the women became more gracious. The heroes were decidedly handsome and the women were beginning to have second thoughts about celibate life. There was, some recalled, a forgotten pleasure in love, and what if their people should die out? They took the advice of a wise old nurse who urged them to welcome these strangers, and join with them in love, and breed new citizens for Lemnos.

This solution was perfectly agreeable to the Argonauts. Queen Hypsipyle gave herself to Jason, and the other heroes found themselves in such eager and accommodating arms that the departure was put off again and again. Many children were conceived, for the honour of Lemnos. And who knows how long this state of happiness might have continued had not Heracles, always impatient for action, marched through the town with his club, banging on doors, ordering reluctant companions to transfer from the bed to the boat? Colchis was still far away, and there was much to do.

Leaving Lemnos, the *Argo* sailed north to Samothrace where the crew made libations and offerings to Persephone, as was the custom with all seafarers who wished to make a safe passage into the Black Sea. Going on by night, to avoid the truculent men of Troy, the ship slipped through the Hellespont and landed in the country of the Doliones. King Cyzicus greeted the Argonauts well, but in the feast that followed the guests were attacked by certain earth-born giants whom the Argonauts had to beat back with bloodshed. In the

morning, with the thanks of Cyzicus and after an exchange of gifts, the Argonauts departed. All day they wrestled with contrary winds and a strong current until, at nightfall, the helmsman put about and headed for safety. As they landed, the Argonauts were ambushed by a band of warriors. In the dark there was a sharp skirmish, but in daylight they saw with dismay that they had killed Cyzicus and several of his soldiers, who had mistaken the *Argo* for a pirate ship.

The dead were given respectful burial and games were held in the king's honour, but day after day the ship was unable to leave in the face of continual storms. At last, the seer Mopsus, who knew the language of birds, heard from a sheltering sea bird that the goddess Rhea held the crew accountable for the death of her earth-born giants. When the Argonauts had made an offering to Rhea, the wind abated and the ship moved on.

As the Argonauts, eager to make up time, sped swiftly through the Propontis, Heracles pulled so strongly on his oar that the blade snapped. Glad for a rest, for Heracles as usual had tested them almost beyond endurance, the crew allowed the ship to drift to land. While fires were lit and a meal prepared, Heracles went in search of timber for a new oar. At the same time, Hylas, his young squire and favourite, went to fetch fresh water. Finding a clear pool, Hylas dipped his pitcher, but the water-nymphs were so taken with his beauty that they pulled him under. When the youth did not return, Heracles went to look for him. Going farther and farther into unknown country, shouting the name of Hylas, Heracles lost touch with the ship. At dawn, with a good breeze blowing and still no sign of Heracles, though many feared Heracles' wrath Jason ordered the crew aboard and sailed away without regret.

'That I can understand,' interrupted the sailor with approval. 'A man like Heracles will lead you onto the rocks. A ship is a delicate thing. It needs a calm and subtle hand to guide it. Bombast and wasteful competition will get you nowhere. I've seen seamen like Heracles and they're nothing but a nuisance.'

The next landfall was Bebrycos in Bithynia. Here, King Amycus, a brutal and vain son of Poseidon, fancied himself as a boxer and refused the Argonauts food and water unless they put up a champion against him. Polydeuces, one of the Dioscuri, was a boxer of repute and gladly put on his thin rawhide gloves. But the king wrapped his meaty fists in metal-studded thongs. Amycus was a powerful, clumsy fighter, given to rushes and wild swings. But Polydeuces boxed skilfully and carefully. For some time, Polydeuces dodged and feinted in the circle of spectators, tiring his opponent with telling jabs and quick counterpunches. Then, when Amycus was panting and sweating heavily, Polydeuces stepped inside his guard and killed the king with

a single crushing blow to his temple. At once, the spectators rioted at the death of their king. Standing shoulder to shoulder the Argonauts easily defeated the shaggy and evil-smelling barbarians, put them to flight and swept on to sack and burn the king's palace. After sacrificing twenty bulls to Poseidon, to atone for the death of his son, Jason quickly cast off from Bebrycos.

As he was now approaching the dangerous strait into the Black Sea, Jason headed for Salmydessus, to ask blind King Phineus for advice. Phineus had the gift of prophecy and had displeased the gods by foretelling the future. So Zeus had offered him blindness or death. Phineus chose blindness, but this in its turn had offended Helius, God of Light, who sent two Harpies as a further punishment for the king. These loathsome, birdlike women fouled his every meal so that the king was on the edge of starvation and readily agreed to help the Argonauts if they would rid him of the Harpies. When the filthy hags came to hover over the next meal, Zetes and Calais, two winged sons of the North Wind, flew at them with their swords and chased them beyond the realms of mankind. In thanks, Phineus pointed out the way to Colchis and warned the Argonauts of the many dangers, the first and most perilous of which were the Clashing Rocks of the Symplegades, which guarded the entrance to the Black Sea.

At this dismal narrows, Jason heard the thunder of the impact and saw huge jets of spray spurt into the sky as the rocks clashed together and rebounded, threatening all ships with instant destruction. Phineus had told Jason to release a dove and to follow it closely through the opening gap. The rocks caught the tail feathers of the bird and sprang apart. Then the Argonauts bent into the oars, driven on by the urgent beat of Orpheus' drum, and sped so swiftly through the narrows that only the tip of the stern-post was pinched by the closing jaws.

The broad sea-road of the Black Sea now ran clear towards Colchis in the east. Hugging the southern shore, the *Argo* went steadily on, landing the crew each evening for food and rest. At the River Lycus, Idmon was killed by a boar while hunting for fresh meat. Then Tiphys, the helmsman, grew sick and died. Ancaeus took his place and steered the ship past savage lands barely touched by the benign influence of the Olympian gods. They left behind the land of the Amazon women, and that of the Chalybes who knew no other trade or occupation than the working of iron. Nor did they stay long with the Mossynoeci who lived promiscuously without marriage in sad wooden huts.

The ship was nearing Colchis. By the Isle of Ares, when a storm blew up just after the Argonauts had repulsed an attack from the Stymphalian birds with their spear-like beaks and feathers, the heroes went to the rescue of four castaways clinging to the wreckage of a boat. These four were the sons of Phrixus attempting a return to their

father's homeland. Jason was glad to have new hands to make up for the losses in the *Argo's* crew. But when the sons heard the purpose of the journey they were reluctant to disturb the shade of Phrixus or to desecrate the sacred grove of the Fleece. Since, however, they owed their lives to the Argonauts, they sacrificed to Ares, took their places on the rowing-benches, and guided the ship safely to Colchis.

'The end of the journey!' the sailor's eyes clouded with memory. 'The river mouth lies under the great, hunched shoulders of the mountains. The declining sun lays a russet path before the ship, leading to the tranquil bay. We drop the anchor and make libations of wine and honey. On the whole, the gods have been kind. Thanks be to Poseidon, another passage, another landing.'

In a quiet evening, the *Argo* sheltered at the mouth of the River Iasis, out of sight of the city of Aea and the palace of Aetes. When they had rested awhile, the Argonauts held a council of war. Some were for guile and some were for force, but Aetes was no mean opponent and the Golden Fleece was guarded by a dragon as strong and cruel as its master, Ares.

In the morning, still undecided, Jason walked to the city to sound out the king. He offered, in return for the Fleece, to lead his battle-hardened Argonauts against the worst enemies of Colchis. But the king frowned. He was far from being impressed. He did not like men from the west, specially those who burst into the sovereign waters of the Black Sea and dared to claim the holy things that belonged to Colchis. He advised Jason to retreat before he had his tongue torn out. But Jason was not deterred by threats. With the powerful backing of the Argonauts, he argued at such length and so forcefully that at last Aetes thought he could only get rid of these determined interlopers by setting Jason impossible conditions.

'In the pasture are two of Hephaestus' bulls,' he told Jason. 'You'll know them by their bronze feet and the fire of their breath. Yoke them, plough the Field of Ares, and sow it with some of the dragon's teeth that have come from Cadmus at Thebes. Then you shall have the Golden Fleece.'

When he heard this, the only thing Jason could do was to pray to the gods.

Now, Aetes had a daughter called Medea who was as lovely as the dawn but was also a witch and a priestess of Hecate. So when Jason asked for divine help, Hera and Athene incited Aphrodite to make Medea fall in love with Jason. Eros struck her heart with his mischievous arrow and Medea, unable to help herself, declared her love to Jason, promising to guide him through the traps set by her

father if he would marry her. Jason willingly agreed. Protected by Medea's magic, he yoked the bulls, ploughed the field, sowed the dragon's teeth, and when armed men sprang out of the ground he repeated the trick that Cadmus had used, throwing stones among the warriors so that they quarrelled and fought and killed each other. With the task done, Jason went to claim his reward. But Aeetes suspected some deception and went back on his word. He drove Jason out of the palace and prepared to attack the Argonauts.

With the king's soldiers closing in, Medea quickly led the Argonauts to the grove of Ares. Throwing a potion made from juniper into the eyes of the dragon, she put it to sleep. Then Jason tore the Golden Fleece from the oak tree and the Argonauts turned and ran for their boat, carrying Medea and her little half-brother, Apsyrtus, along with them. Soldiers barred their way. There was a skirmish and some of the heroes were wounded, but all managed to get aboard and their oars, dug deep, made the *Argo* skim from the shore. The king's ships were already on the water, ready to cut off the Argonauts at the point. All seemed lost, with the Argonauts vastly outnumbered, until Medea saved them with a cruel sacrifice. She killed Apsyrtus, cut him in pieces and threw the bits of his body in front of the Colchian ships. As the enemy ships paused to recover the pieces of the little prince, the *Argo* flew between the fleet and the land and made for the freedom of the wide sea.

In the open sea, the ship was lost. Greek mariners were never safe without the comfort of landfalls and islands and a half-familiar coastline. Tiphys, the great pilot, was dead. His successor manned the tiller but Hera chose the course. Following the path of the sun to the west, the ship came to an unknown land. A broad stretch of water led inland. Was it a seaway or a river? The Argonauts dropped the sail and rowed. They struggled against the current, up the Don or the Danube, or some say it was the Eridanus. And when the banks closed in and the ship could no longer make headway against shallows and rapids, they hauled the *Argo* on rollers and dragged it to another river, north-flowing, into fir forest and sodden plains and lands of ice. At the cold edge of the world Hera directed them into the stream of Oceanus which swept them south to the Pillars of Heracles and the landlocked sea of their ancestors. With relief, they landed at Elba and lay on the cool pebbles till nightfall, searching for constellations that pointed the way home. When they rose from the beach the pebbles were marked with the pattern of their skin.

Grateful to the friendly stars, the Argonauts eased their way past Sicily into the Ionian Sea. But as they approached Corcyra, on the threshold of home, the oracular voice spoke from the piece of Zeus' sacred oak in the prow of the ship. It warned them that their hands

were still stained with the blood of Apsyrtus and that the *Argo* would not reach home until the crew was purified. Across a narrow channel the mountains of Thesprotia enticed them with dreams of the homeland, but the Argonauts had to turn away and sail to the island of Aeaëa where Medea's aunt, Circe, an even greater sorceress than her neice, reluctantly purified them.

With the crew freed from the burden of guilt, the *Argo* seemed to have wings. Thetis, the sea-goddess, smoothed a path through the waves and watched over the progress of the ship. At the island of Anthemoessa, where the Sirens drew unwary sailors onto the rocks with the unbearable sweetness of their singing, Orpheus took his lyre and went among the rowing-benches, filling the ears of his companions with an even more ravishing music. Of all the crew, only Butes, the Athenian, jumped overboard and was lost to the Sirens.

Hurrying away from that temptation, the Argonauts came to a danger they could not avoid. Here, the sea ran roaring into a gorge, with the jagged crag of Scylla on one side and the whirlpool of Charybdis on the other. It was enough to strike terror even in heroes. But Thetis saw the peril and put her hand on the helm while her attendants, the Nereids, picked out for the ship the best course through the violent current. Then they came into sunlight and quiet water and sailed calmly on to the island of the Phaeacians.

As the Argonauts landed they saw many sails chasing towards the island. A fleet from Colchis, which had been hunting the *Argo* for many weeks, had picked up the trail and now followed the heels of the enemy into the harbour. King Alcinous found himself with awkward guests. The formidable fleet from Colchis demanded the return of both Medea and the Golden Fleece. Medea was afraid to go back, fearing the just anger of Aeetes, and Alcinous was reluctant to have his peaceful island contaminated by fighting and bloodshed. Offering to mediate between the two sides, he secretly told Jason and Medea to marry that night.

Next day, he delivered his judgment: 'If Medea is still a virgin, she must return to Colchis. If not, she may stay with Jason.'

Displaying the sheets of the marriage bed, Jason proved the coming together of man and wife, and the Colchians, bound by oath to accept the king's judgment, departed with many mutterings.

The seasons were changing. The time of easy sailing, at the spring equinox, was far behind. The *Argo*, after so many delays, left the Phaeacians and was at the mercy of rougher airs, blowing erratically by command of the Four Winds. Boreas, the North Wind, filled his lungs and sent the ship scudding helplessly to the Bay of Syrtes in Africa where it grounded. Unable to relaunch in the teeth of the wind, the Argonauts took heart from instructions given to Jason in a dream.

They hauled the ship onto rollers and, shepherded by goat-like deities of the desert, followed a white horse for twelve days to Lake Tritonis in Libya where the god Triton directed them by river back to the sea. Even then troubles were not at an end. After a passage from the African shore in heavy weather, the Argonauts wanted to stop and rest in Crete. But the bronze giant Talos, the sentinel of the island, beat them back with a bombardment of rocks. Medea alone managed to slip ashore and tempted Talos with a narcotic drink. When the potion put the giant to sleep she removed the bronze pin that stopped his veins and watched his lifeblood run into the sands.

After leaving Crete, the *Argo* came within the embrace of the Aegean, moving through well-remembered islands, past Andros, along the double bow of the Euboean coast, and into the welcoming jaws of the Gulf of Pagasae. Weather-worn and weary, the heroes splashed through cool shallows onto land turning sombre and autumnal.

As Mantes related the homecoming, the sailor was suddenly more attentive. His face took on a look of happy solemnity. His gaze across the sea seemed to encompass all its moods, all the possibilities and satisfactions of seafaring.

‘Yes,’ he affirmed, ‘those Argonauts were true Greek mariners: free, equal, bold and enquiring. They had departed with high hearts, set on a noble task. They had battled respectfully with the gods of wind and weather, and they had not been defeated. They were not dismayed in strange places but bent their backs and went on. And heaven, in the main, approved their venture. After many by-ways and surprises, their spirit had been tested and rang true. They came home in triumph to the old world and the new wine, and a girl or a wife on the beach waving a scarf in welcome.’

But on this occasion there were no wives, no women on the beach. Pelias, the old tyrant, still ruled in Iolcus and had taken advantage of Jason’s absence to kill the hero’s parents. The other Argonauts, too long away, dispersed to their far homes. Jason and Medea faced an uncertain future alone. Jason was unsure how to go on but Medea advised him to hide himself and the *Argo* for the time being and to put his trust in her magic. Then she went to Iolcus disguised as a wise old crone, a votary of Artemis, with an elixir of life to sell. Pelias, who was old and steeped in sin but did not wish to die, heard of the elixir and demanded a demonstration. Sprinkling magic herbs into a boiling cauldron, Medea threw into the broth the dismembered pieces of a tough old ram. After a few minutes a new lamb sprang from the pot. Pelias was convinced. Medea charmed him to sleep and ordered his daughters to cut him in pieces. But this time the herbs in the broth

were of a different kind, and no new prince arose out of the cauldron.

The king was dead but his son Acastus, even though he had been an Argonaut, was duty-bound to avenge him. He banished Jason and Medea from Iolcus and they went willingly, for Jason had no further interest in a place where he had never lived and where his parents lay dead. He went first to Minyan Orchomenus and hung the Golden Fleece in the temple of Zeus. Then he sailed the *Argo* to Corinth, dragged it onto blocks and dedicated it as a memorial to Poseidon.

Jason and Medea settled in Corinth where Medea's family had a claim to the throne. For ten years they lived happily enough, then troubles came between them. Jason had seen the ruthless and pitiless nature of her powers, and what was she anyway but a sorceress from the east? There were things about her that no Greek could understand. He grew suspicious of her, and perhaps also afraid. When the chance came he repudiated her and planned a marriage with the Theban princess Glauce. Medea, never more dangerous than in adversity, pretended to submit to his will. Graciously, she sent Glauce a golden crown and a white wedding robe. But the robe was poisoned and burnt Glauce to the bone. Then, in a final act of bitter revenge, Medea put to the sword her own two children by Jason and fled to Athens in a chariot drawn by winged serpents.

With his hopes and his posterity destroyed, Jason left Corinth and wandered homeless from city to city. He was a man apart, marked by his achievement and his tragedy. In his old age, in the course of his travels, he found himself once again on the isthmus of Corinth. A prisoner to old memories, he sat in the shadow of the *Argo* and contemplated the workings of Fate. As he bent his head, overwhelmed by the decisions of the gods, a loose beam fell from the decaying fabric of the famous boat and killed him.

Long after he had finished speaking Mantes remained jammed into a corner by the bulwark, watching the land recede. Underfoot, he began to feel the tricks of the waves, and on his cheek the inconstancy of the wind. The sailor had left him, going about the business of the ship. By mid-afternoon the wind veered and freshened. The mountains to the north and west softened and almost disappeared under a pall of cloud, and a thin rain ruffled the water. The wind was nearly on the beam now, and the ship started to roll in choppy seas. Mantes clung to something solid. He felt wretched.

The sailor came hurrying to his side of the deck and untied a rope. 'Change of course,' he shouted cheerfully through the wind. 'Goodbye to Lemnos. The wind is driving us south and east. We'll run for Cyme. If we miss it on the left, we'll hit Lesbos, and on the right, we'll get to

Chios. Good luck to us either way. But you, poet, you'll not see Samothrace for many a day.'

Anywhere will do, Mantès thought in his misery, just so long as it's land. There are times when the destination is not important.



Menelaus and Helen

THE TALE OF TROY

‘SHAME about a woman! Grown men shouldn’t bother with such matters. A man’s concern is with great deeds, with courage, fighting, plunder, life at the edge of death. Let us talk of bold voyages, discoveries, dangerous enterprises far from home. Love is a soft blind thing, hardly worth the breath it takes to tell it.’

Mantes smiled at this outburst of male indignation.

‘In the consequences that flowed from this one woman,’ he replied, ‘there are great deeds enough to fill the volumes of the world for a thousand years to come. Besides, this Helen was no ordinary woman. Alcmena, mother of Heracles, was accounted the most beautiful of humans, but she was as nothing compared to Helen. For Helen was the daughter of Zeus, imprinted by the father with a godlike presence. She was semi-divine and her brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, were the Dioscuri, that is to say, the twin boys of Zeus. They lent their strong arms to noble causes, and they were the mariner’s guide too, sending the friendly fire that sits on masts and rigging of storm-bound ships. When such a family springs from the fount of divine pleasure, what extraordinary events may be expected? Zeus foresaw it all and let the great tale unfold.’

They had come north, Mantes and the old soldier, thrown together by the chances of travel in a little ship bumping carefully along the coast from Cyme. The ship was an island trader. They had left Lesbos and Tenedos behind. Imbros, Samothrace and Thasos lay ahead, if the gods and the winds were willing. But now the ship was tied up in Sigeum, at the mouth of the Scamander in the Troad, and the two elderly men were making a small inland pilgrimage, to a scene of ancient troubles.

The Asiatic plain was arid, bone dry, dust on top of dust, through which the River Scamander etched a languid, silvery line, as if dragging itself painfully out of a vast, lost interior. A violent, hot wind, a child of the Egyptian khamsin, irritated the gaunt bones of the land. To the south, only the high nude hump of Mysian Mount Ida

gave a sense of scale to the low plain. Here, the city of Troy had been built and destroyed and rebuilt again. New walls were slowly rising amid extensive old ruins. Among the rubble of time the old men trod cautiously on shattered skulls, blackened stones, arrowheads, charred fragments of wood. Under their feet lay the ashes and grief of a fallen empire.

Who were these peoples of the plain who incurred the wrath of god and men? Their lineage was both ancient and obscure. Some say that Scamander, the Cretan, and his son Teucer led some wanderers here in a distant time of famine. Apollo told them to establish themselves wherever beasts of the earth attacked them by night. And when hungry mice came in the dark to eat their bow-strings and their leather tunics, the Cretans made their home in sight of a mountain they called Ida, in memory of their own Cretan peak. Scamander died in battle, drowned in the river which took his name, and Teucer succeeded him.

But others say this Cretan colony was not the beginning of Troy. That event they date from the flight of Dardanus, son of Zeus, from Samothrace, who fled to the Phrygian shore on an inflated oxskin. Teucer received him well, for Dardanus was a powerful warrior and conquered the barbarians of the surrounding lands. In time, Dardanus became king and extended his rule deep into Asia Minor.

After many years, Ilus, son of Tros and great-grandson of Dardanus, attended the Phrygian games, to demonstrate the extent of his power and his unrivalled position. When he won the wrestling in the games he was awarded fifty youths and fifty maidens and was told to follow a spotted heifer until it lay down, and there he was to found a new city. The heifer walked towards the sea and the setting sun and lay down on the low hill of Ate, just inland from the mouth of the Hellespont. Here Ilus began the foundations of a city sometimes called Ilium, after the founder, but also called Troy in honour of his father Tros.

When the ground was cleared and the boundaries marked, Ilus made a sacrifice and prayed to Zeus, Guardian of Cities, for a favourable sign. In the morning, Ilus discovered outside his tent the Palladium, the life-size statue that Athene had made to commemorate her dead companion Pallas.

Then Ilus heard the voice of Apollo: 'Take this holy image and keep it forever, and in doing so you will preserve your city.'

When the city was built, Ilus placed the Palladium in a shrine on the citadel and appointed priests to maintain it and guard it, for it was the symbol of the city's life, and the safety of the people rested on its

safety.

This city, standing at the crossroads of trade between Europe and Asia and commanding the entrance to the Hellespont, grew large and rich. With great good fortune, King Laomedon, son of Ilus, had gods to build his battlements. Poseidon, extending his huge muscles and beetling his brow, did the labour as a penance for offending Zeus, while genial Apollo played his lyre to soothe the Earth-Shaker's temper. But Laomedon, forgetting both honesty and holy duty, refused the gods their reward and was only saved from instant punishment by the intervention of Heracles. And then, such is the self-deception of foolish pride, Laomedon repeated his error with Heracles. After the hero had saved Hesione, the king's daughter, from destruction by the sea-monster, Laomedon again withheld the payment. He had promised Heracles the royal horses given to the city by Zeus in compensation for the Trojan prince Ganymedes, who had been abducted by Zeus to Olympus to be the cup-bearer of the gods. Laomedon died for this insult to Heracles, and his sons were killed, too, all except Podarces who came to the throne of Troy under the new name of Priam.

A new name, and a new respect and humility in the face of the gods. Priam, with the mistakes of his father before him, was careful not to offend. When his second wife, Hecabe, dreamt that she was about to give birth to a flaming torch that would destroy the city, Priam was alarmed and took the sign seriously. He ordered the newborn babe to be exposed on Mount Ida. But black-robed Death did not take the child. At first, the baby was suckled by a she-bear. Then he was found by a herdsman who named him Paris and raised him on the mountain among herds and flocks. The boy grew into a youth outstripping all others in looks and daring. He was so good-looking, the nymph Oenone saw him and sighed, and she crept at night into his shelter of branches and became his lover. To his fellow herdsmen he was a tower of strength, so strong and vigilant against cattle-thieves and robbers that his friends called him Alexander, 'the Defender of Men'.

So when King Priam sent from Troy for a bullock to sacrifice on the anniversary of his little son exposed so long ago and presumed to be dead, Paris was the natural choice to lead the animal to the city. The funeral games were in progress and Paris, as fine a figure as any athlete, begged to be allowed to take part. But when he won the boxing and the footrace, the many other sons of Priam grew jealous and wanted to kill this unknown upstart. Deiphobus was about to strike Paris down when Cassandra, Priam's daughter, cried out in the voice of prophecy: 'Cursed be the hand that kills a brother!'

The sons of Priam drew back astonished until Cassandra explained what had happened. Then they led their brother Paris to Priam who

wept and rejoiced at this sudden delivery. He acknowledged his lost son and gave him his proper place in the royal household.

Now, a little before Paris was translated from rustic Mount Ida to the palace of Troy, on Mount Pelion in Thessaly the Olympian gods were preparing for another festive occasion. From the beginning of time, Almighty Zeus had been fretted by a puzzle of the heart. He had long desired the sea-goddess Thetis, daughter of Nereus, but had been warned that her child would become mightier than the father. So he kept his passion in check until at last, to spare himself further temptation, he decided to marry Thetis to the mortal Peleus.

Like many young princes and heroes before him, Peleus was being trained for manhood on Mount Pelion by Cheiron, the King of the Centaurs. Cheiron knew very well that no goddess would be flattered by a mortal husband, and also that Thetis would be no easy catch since, like her father, she could change her shape at will. Cheiron advised Peleus to seize her while she was asleep and not to let go, whatever happened. Stalking her to a quiet cave where she was having an afternoon nap and taking her unawares, Peleus held on grimly while she changed from lion to serpent, from water to fire, from goddess to giant squid hidden behind its veil of ink. But she could not avoid the destiny chosen for her by Zeus and at last grew still in her pursuer's arms.

The gods gathered on Pelion for the wedding, bringing with them many gifts. But Eris, Goddess of Strife, who had not been invited, came out of spite and scattered among the divine assembly her own peculiar gift of dissension. Observing the three queens of heaven – Hera, Athene and Aphrodite – in a rare mood of smiling harmony, Eris threw at their feet a golden apple inscribed: 'To the fairest.'

At once, the good mood vanished and the three great goddesses began to bicker over the prize, growing so heated and angry that Zeus had to step between them. Zeus had noted before, in a dispute concerning Ares, that handsome young Paris, the herdsman of Ida, had pacified the violent war-god with great tact. He now summoned Hermes and told the messenger of the gods to put the dispute for the apple to the judgment of Paris.

Then the court of heaven flew to Mysia, to seek out Paris on Mount Ida. Paris, who thought of himself as a mere herdsman, was abashed and confused by the commission. He was not worthy. He blushed. But his blush was very fetching. The three goddesses took up studied poses.

'Perhaps it would be best to divide the apple?' Paris tentatively suggested to Hermes.

'The prize does not permit it,' Hermes replied sternly. 'All or nothing.'

But who would dare to judge between these three? Hera, the consort of Zeus, a majestic and overwhelming figure, offered Paris the full protection of her position and authority. Serene Athene, who feared neither god nor monster, promised him wisdom and perpetual success in battle. But Aphrodite, beautiful lascivious Aphrodite, took Paris softly by the hand and sighed and looked downcast and breathed in his ear.

‘Such a gentle, handsome young man, and I, alas, have so little to offer you. Why, Helen herself, most glorious of all women, would be more than pleased to accept you.’

‘Is she not married already?’ stammered Paris, with his senses thoroughly confused.

‘Yes, that is a little difficulty. But the heart can undo such small impediments. If you were to give me the apple – unworthy though I am – I think I could incline her love towards you. I have, as you no doubt know, some influence in these matters. Yes, her heart shall certainly belong to you.’

And Aphrodite’s sweet doleful lips brushed his face with just the ghost of a kiss.

Disengaging his hand from her too tender grip, Paris took the apple and gave it to the Goddess of Love.

Zeus desired Leda, wife of Tyndareus of Sparta. She could not escape him. The Father of the Gods came brutally to her in the form of a swan, great wings beating, and took the nape of her neck in his beak and trod her down and possessed her. As a result of this union she brought forth an egg from which came Helen, the beauty and the wonder of the world.

‘That name again,’ the old soldier growled. ‘We make too much of her. The valley of the Eurotas and the country of Sparta breed fine stock – that much I know from my experience. But was Helen’s beauty any more extraordinary than the oleanders and the rhododendrons and the citrus groves in flower? Mankind must keep a sense of proportion about a face and a figure.’

‘Some things are judged, not in the sharp light of day, but in the corrupting half-light of the imagination,’ Mantes corrected him. ‘A king will sometimes throw away his patrimony for a pearl, and a philosopher lose all reason over a barbarian slave-girl.’

‘Go on, then,’ the soldier said grudgingly. ‘Tell me the worst about this woman.’

Helen, indeed, blossomed like the flowers of the Eurotas, and by the time she was fully grown there was none in the world of humans to compare with her. The princes of the Peloponnese, and beyond, were

suitors for her hand, all except for Agamemnon, High King of Argos, who was already married to her half-sister Clytemnestra. After much competition, Menelaus of Mycenae, brother of Agamemnon and richest of the princes, won her. But Tyndareus, anxious not to cause friction among great men by this choice, bound all the suitors by oath to abide by his decision and to defend Helen's husband, whomever he might be, against the oppression and spite of jealous men. And to solemnize this oath Tyndareus made offerings to the gods. By an unfortunate oversight, however, he forgot to include Aphrodite.

Tyndareus died. The Dioscuri, Castor and Polydeuces, were taken into heaven by Zeus and set in the stars as the constellation of Gemini. Menelaus became King of Sparta and lived there peacefully with his wife, Helen.

On a certain day in the good sailing season, a fleet from the east put into the port that served the inland city of Sparta. Paris of Troy had come to beg King Menelaus to purify him for the accidental killing of a kinsman. Aphrodite had set the events in motion. In Troy, she had drowned out the prophetic laments of Cassandra and Helenus, the far-seeing children of Priam. She had overridden the fears of King Priam himself, and she had made Paris deaf to the pathetic pleas of his first love, the nymph Oenone. Aphrodite sent the wind that blew Paris so smoothly west. She put a welcome for the Trojan in Menelaus' stolid and unsuspecting heart. After nine days of feasting, she arranged, providentially, that Menelaus should leave for Crete, to honour the funeral games of his grandfather. In the palace of Sparta, Helen was alone with Paris.

On Mount Ida, the goddess had promised Helen to Paris. When he saw her in the flesh he knew that he wanted her more than anything in the world. Looks passed between them, a light touch of the hand, almost accidental, a sudden flush of heat and embarrassment. Menelaus was her husband and they had children. He was noble, dull, worthy and rich. But how could he compete for her heart against a prince invested by the Goddess of Love herself with all the radiance and passionate desire of love-famished youth? That night, they eloped.

Fleeing to the ships, Paris and Helen paused only long enough to dedicate a shrine to Aphrodite on an island by the harbour and there to consummate a new love. Then they sailed on a long journey home, driven about by angry winds which Hera sent against them. They took with them the serving-girls from the palace at Sparta, and some also say the palace treasure. Perhaps that was malicious gossip, an attempt to stain a god-given love with ordinary greed. King Priam and the people of Troy, however, looked for no treasure other than Helen herself. Despite omens of doom, despite the certainty of a wrong committed, when the Trojans saw Helen for the first time they forgave

her everything. The world might be won or lost. Who but the gods could know? But for Helen's sake, the risk was worth taking.

When Menelaus returned from Crete, summoned hastily by a message from Hera, and learnt what had happened to Helen, he began to claim from his fellow princes the duty owed to him by reason of their oath. His heralds went to call men to war, and great warriors came from far and wide, some thirsting for glory and some reluctantly, but bound by their word.

The fleet and the army, as large a force as mankind had seen, began to gather at Aulis. King Agamemnon of Argos, overlord of the Peloponnese and brother of Menelaus, was commander-in-chief. From the ancient cities of giant walls he brought the largest contingent. Menelaus, the wronged husband, supported him with sixty ships, and the brothers had as their chief counsellor the old greybeard Nestor who came from sandy Pylos with no less than ninety ships. From the coastal towns and villages that lay between Epidaurus and Tiryns, Diomedes brought eighty more, while the Athenians sent another fifty under Menestheus. And from farther afield came representatives of all the confederation of Greek peoples – Mycenaeans, Argives, Achaeans, Aetolians, Dorians, Hellenes, Danaans – all sending ships and men from Boeotia, Euboea, Minyan Orchomenus, from the wilder lands of Thessaly, Acarnania and the Epirus, from Crete and Rhodes, and from many, many islands. Even the inland mountain men of Arcadia wished to go, but Agamemnon had to loan them ships, for they knew nothing of seafaring.

But some leaders tried to evade the call to arms. It is said that Idomeneus, the wealthy lord of Crete, offered the grandest fleet of all but only if his ships had the foremost place in the expedition. Cinyras of Cyprus promised fifty ships but sent one real boat and forty-nine small models. Apollo killed him for this deception.

Among the bands of soldiers were many seasoned and formidable fighters. Old Nestor had survived many campaigns. Diomedes, both brave and cunning, had cut his teeth in the battles of the Epigoni against Thebes. The lesser Ajax from Locris, a fearsome man with a spear, paraded his violent, proud, untrustworthy nature. He walked the camp with his nose in the air, followed like a dog by his pet serpent. His namesake, the greater Ajax, son of Telamon, was also a boastful fellow. He was not rich, being somewhat slow-witted, and could raise only twelve ships from Salamis. But he was stronger and braver, a head taller than any Greek, and second only to Achilles in the arts of war. Where the fighting was thickest, there he would be, almost invulnerable, for Heracles had wrapped him in the famous lionskin at birth, making Ajax safe from blows except for a small area around neck and shoulder where the lionskin failed to meet. Besides

these heroes, there was also clever Palamedes, Agamemnon's right-hand man, and Philoctetes, who owned the bow and the poisoned arrows of Heracles.

Two men, however, were indispensable for the expedition, and at first Agamemnon waited for them in vain. Odysseus, the fox, was needed for his incomparable understanding of men's motives and the ways of the world. And Achilles, son of Peleus, was needed to be first in battle, the one warrior whom all respected and all feared.

War had no attraction for Odysseus. Wise beyond most, he foresaw the barren waste in lives and treasure. Ithaca, his poor island home in the Ionian Sea, was unable to bear the expense of a long campaign. He was happy in his marriage to Penelope, governing the modest life of a modest land, and an oracle had warned that a voyage to Troy would drag him from home for twenty years. So when Menelaus and Palamedes came to him in Ithaca, to bind him to his oath, Odysseus feigned madness. In rags and a battered felt cap, he yoked an ass and an ox, ploughed, and sowed salt instead of seed. But Palamedes knew the tricks of the man. As Penelope stood by with the infant Telemachus in her arms, Palamedes grabbed the baby and put him in the path of the plough. To save his son, Odysseus halted the plough and proved his sanity. Reluctantly, he left for the war where his advice fended off disaster and made the best of many a bad day. But he never forgave Palamedes.

With Odysseus within the fold, the Greeks were happier. But the generals could not be completely satisfied until Achilles was persuaded to join them. But where was he?

When the sea-goddess Thetis was forced by the decision of Zeus to marry the mortal Peleus, she still longed for immortal children. As each of her babies was born she held it in the flames, to burn away mortality. But every one of the children died. At the seventh attempt, the desperate father, Peleus, pulled baby Achilles from the fire and substituted a giant's thigh-bone. Since Thetis could not make her son immortal, she tried to make him invulnerable instead by dipping him in the River Styx. Only his heel, by which Thetis held him in the water, remained a place of weakness. Then Thetis, having had enough of humans, returned to the sea, though she still kept a maternal eye on her son, Achilles.

Peleus sent the growing boy to be schooled by Cheiron on Mount Pelion. When Achilles approached manhood, the most accomplished of the Centaur's many warlike pupils, Thetis warned Cheiron to hide him away. He was too young to compete for Helen, or to take the oath of the suitors, but Thetis knew the danger of Aphrodite's scheming. She knew that Achilles' lust for glory would pull him towards Troy, but that he would die if he went there. So Cheiron disguised Achilles

as a girl and sent him to the court of King Lycomedes in Scyros. For a time he lived as a woman in the women's quarters, but not so womanly that he forgot his male nature. On Scyros, he fathered Neoptolemus, the flame-haired son who later followed in his dead father's footsteps on the tragic plain of Troy.

With Odysseus to guide them, Nestor and Diomedes traced Achilles to Scyros. Lycomedes calmly denied any knowledge of the youth and allowed the generals to search the palace. As they did so, Odysseus had a suspicion about a certain tall, graceful girl who moved more like a panther than a lowly serving-woman. He planned a little trap. He filled a hall with many gifts, including arms and armour, and invited all the women to choose what they wanted. At that moment, the trumpet sounded the battle-alarm. The women fled, all except for one tall figure who stripped off a woman's clothes, ran for the armour and took up the heaviest sword. With his disguise uncovered, Achilles could not be denied the joy of war. Willingly, he joined the expedition, setting out for Aulis with his bosom friend, Patroclus, and placed himself proudly at the head of his Myrmidon soldiers.

At Aulis, in the sheltered waters between Euboea and Boeotia, the vast fleet jostled for room between shore and shore. The sacrifice to Zeus and Apollo was prepared. The Greeks were ready to leave, to avenge Menelaus against Paris and against Troy.

'Respect the gods and give them due worship, by all means,' the soldier was grumbling again. 'But this story you tell me, poet, is barely credible.'

Though old, the soldier was still spritely and his sight was keen. He had made the round of the walls. He had seen the lie of the land and inspected the fallen battlements. In the gaps of the smashed ramparts, in the odd glory of the few remaining towers, in the intermingling of bones and dust, his practised campaigner's eye perceived something of the to and fro of attack and defence. He felt the reality of war.

'Old man, war does not come from poetry,' he went on. 'No, it arises out of commercial jealousy, or loss of trade, or imperial ambition, or deliberate foreign policy, or just the press of people at home clamouring for light and land. I have heard it said that Zeus, Lord of the Thunderbolt, pursued this war because the world was burdened with too many people. He wished to make a void in the race of men.'

'I do not deny,' Mantes replied, 'that rivalries of trade and the wish for power and the fretful expansion of many peoples helped to bring Greek and Trojan face to face in bitter warfare. Yet the gods look beyond these mundane matters into the hearts of men. Wars are made by man, and man's motives are pride and greed and selfishness. Where

there is sin, the gods exact penance. Where there is guilt, there must be punishment and retribution. Learn, O simple-minded soldier, learn before it is too late, that the gods bring down those who climb too high. Thus it was with great Achilles, who choked on pride and anger. And thus it was with Paris, so handsome a youth, and with Troy, so rich and powerful a city in its time.'

Heaven had taken sides. Because of Paris and Helen, Troy was condemned, but the Greeks also were not without fault – what man is? At Aulis, when Agamemnon was making sacrifice for success and safety, a snake with the markings of blood slithered from beneath the altar into a plane tree where it devoured a mother bird and eight young. It was a dire omen, which Calchas, the seer, explained in this way: Troy would not fall until nine years had elapsed. Subdued by the thoughts of time and all its pains, the Greeks departed.

What began with a bad omen continued with ill luck. The fleet was driven off course to Mysia, which the pilot mistook for the Troad. After some purposeless skirmishes the ships were knocked round and about by violent winds until forced to regroup at Aulis. The wind off the sea still blew strongly. Passing the time in hunting, Achilles offended Artemis by boasting of his prowess, and the cold, unforgiving goddess would not let the wind subside until the commander of the army, Agamemnon, had made a sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia. She, the prettiest of his children, was brought from Mycenae and consented with heroic resolution to die for the Greek cause. Some say that Artemis relented at the last moment, for Zeus hated human sacrifice. As the knife was about to fall, the goddess substituted a hind on the altar and carried Iphigenia to Taurus, to be a priestess of her temple. Then the wind shifted and the fleet sailed again.

This time, fair breezes took the Greeks quickly to Tenedos, where Achilles rashly killed King Tenes, a son of Apollo. Then Philoctetes, the keeper of Heracles' bow and arrows, was bitten by a snake. The bite grew septic and stank, and Philoctetes cried out in such pain that the army could not bear it. A swift boat took him away and abandoned him on a small, bird-stained rock off Lemnos.

Amid these sombre signs, with some gloom in their minds, the Greeks went the last lap to the Asian shore. Protesilaus, who desired the glory, jumped first to the beach and was instantly struck down by Hector. With this warning of the stern contest to come, the rest of the army disembarked more cautiously and camped on the plain. Ahead, the towers and fortifications of Troy looked formidable. The Trojans were prepared and included in their ranks many experienced and skilful fighters. They were no strangers to war. Now the Greeks knew what the omens had already warned, that there is no great achievement without great effort, no conquest without suffering.

For nine years the Greek tide of battle surged and ebbed. Unable to make a dent in the walls that Poseidon and Apollo had built, the Greek army harried the surrounding countryside, stirring up enmity from many barbarian kings in Phrygia and Mysia who had no reason to love the invading Greeks. With the help of these allies, the Trojans easily stood firm. The Trojan generals were not inferior to those of the Greeks. Hector, first among the Trojans and the eldest of Priam's fifty sons, could stand toe to toe against Achilles himself. Paris, the cause of the city's woes, was anxious to redeem himself by the fury of his warlike arm. Even Antenor and Aeneas, two men who spoke for peace and the return of Helen, fought bravely like patriots and won the respect of the Greeks for upright and honourable conduct.

After nine years, soldiers on both sides were weary and despondent. They hated an enemy they could not overcome but also felt despair at their own lack of success. Comrades became quick to quarrel. In the tenth year, after an attack on an outlying town, Achilles returned to camp with two captive girls. One, he took for himself while the other was claimed by his commander, Agamemnon. But this girl, Chryseis, was a priestess of Apollo, who sent a plague on the Greeks until his servant was returned. Annoyed at the loss of a bed-fellow, Agamemnon demanded that Achilles should give way to a superior officer and let him have the other captive instead. Pale with anger, Achilles retired to his tent and vowed that he and his Myrmidons would fight no more until Agamemnon put right this act of injustice. Thetis heard the complaint of her son and made Zeus promise to withhold a Greek victory until the honour of Achilles was satisfied.

It was a moment of Trojan advantage, but the army of King Priam, too, was without heart. Hector, sick of slaughter, tried to resolve the deadly stalemate by a duel between Paris, the adulterer, and his victim Menelaus. Yet when Menelaus had Paris at his mercy, and peace was almost within grasp, Aphrodite wrapped her favourite in a cloud and spirited him away to safety.

For the war, which was a bitter struggle between men, was also being fought in heaven. Aphrodite, the troublemaker, naturally came to the aid of Troy. But the hands of love are soft, unused to weapons, and she was little help on the battlefield. Bold Diomedes spilt her divine blood and sent her whining home to Olympus. Both the twin gods, Apollo and Artemis, also supported Troy. Each had a grievance against Achilles, who had killed Apollo's son on Tenedos and had offended Artemis by his idle boasting at Aulis. Ares, the God of War, sniffed the blood from either side, for nothing pleased him better than death. If he had an inclination, he leant towards Troy, drawn that way by his lover, Aphrodite. But greater deities than he, Athene in particular, set the edge of Greek swords against him and drove him

wounded from the battle.

Those gods were powerful allies. But the weight of Olympian support lay with justice and the Greek cause. Tempestuous Hera and invincible Athene, both spurned by Paris, had good reason to set themselves against the favourite of Aphrodite. Earth-shaking Poseidon and the lame smith, Hephaestus, set sea and fire in opposition to Troy. But Zeus, Father of All, kept heaven in balance. Time and the Fates were not yet satisfied, and so Almighty Zeus withheld the final decision.

While Achilles sulked, and a truce failed, fighting broke out again with renewed fury. In the nick of time, Diomedes and Odysseus stopped Thracian reinforcements from reaching Troy. They killed Rhesus and captured his barbaric white horses, which had been destined, had they got through, to save the city. Then the Trojans, taking advantage of Achilles' absence, counterattacked, stormed the palisade that guarded the Greek fleet and set fire to some of the ships. In this desperate plight, Patroclus put on Achilles' armour and rallied the Greeks. The sight of the golden armour of the hero terrified the Trojans, who turned and ran for home, closely followed by Patroclus. But Apollo had noted the deception. At the gate of the city, the god knocked the weapon from Patroclus' hand, then Hector completed the work of death, hacked him down and stripped Achilles' armour from the body.

The year had turned. Wild flowers dared to show their faces again on the stained and trampled banks of the Scamander. In the absence of Achilles, the armies had fought each other almost to a standstill. Agamemnon, Odysseus and Diomedes were all wounded. Greater Ajax and Hector had fought hand to hand from dawn to nightfall, when they fell apart in exhaustion and mutual respect. That was how things stood when news came to Achilles' tent of the fall of his dear friend, Patroclus. When he heard of this death, Achilles covered his head and rolled in the dirt with grief.

Now nothing could stop Achilles. He cast off lethargy and self-pity and concentrated all his immense powers of destruction into a thirst for revenge. Thetis brought him new armour, forged by Hephaestus, and he drove into the enemy like a wolf among sheep. Hector sheltered behind the Scamander and the river-god lashed his waters in Achilles' face. But Hephaestus sent fire to dry the river-bed and Achilles pursued Hector until the Trojan champion was forced to turn and fight. Who else was capable of taming this murderous Greek? In stunned silence, the armies drew back from the two heroes. Then the spirit of Hector, brave though he was, failed him as he saw in the eyes of his opponent the terrible enormity of his rage. Hector fled, and Achilles chased him three times around the walls before he caught the

Trojan and thrust a spear right through his body. There was a shout, of triumph on one side and terror on the other, then a silence in heaven as Achilles hitched the dead man by the heels to his chariot and dragged the body in the dust to the Greek camp.

Long flames consumed Patroclus and his funeral pyre, on which horses, hunting dogs and twelve noble Trojans with their throats cut were also sacrificed. But the battered corpse of Hector was only grudgingly ransomed to Priam for its weight in gold. Now it seemed to Trojan eyes that Death and Achilles stalked hand in hand. The anger of Achilles was without bounds, a tyranny of slaughter that displeased the gods. Though he was half in love with her beauty, he killed Penthesileia when the Amazon queen brought her warriors to help Priam. And it was whispered that he did an unspeakable act with her dead body. Foul-mouthed Thersites, who respected no man, jeered at Achilles for his filthy lust and received in return a single deadly blow which drove his teeth into his skull.

At his wit's end, in the face of this ferocity, King Priam summoned his half-brother, Memnon, to bring an army of black soldiers from the lands of Ethiopia. With fresh arms, and used to heat and hardship, these fighters brought temporary relief. Memnon killed the son of Nestor and for a moment the Greeks were in disarray. Then Achilles called out to Zeus to judge between him and Memnon. Their lives were weighed in the divine scales, and Memnon was found wanting. As the Ethiopian was trading blows with Ajax, Achilles shouldered his colleague aside and spilled the guts of the black king. In grief, his followers, lost and far from home, turned into birds and circled his grave with forlorn cries.

Here, Mantes paused in the narrative, for the old soldier was growing red again.

'Disgraceful military conduct,' he snapped. 'A soldier without honour is no more than a snarling dog. Achilles should have known what every old campaigner knows, that excessive rage in a general is a kind of disease. It may frighten the enemy, but it clogs the mind with a vision of blood and warps the rational decisions that lead to victory. It is no surprise that the gods eventually look coldly on such a man.'

Achilles' race was run. It was time for the Olympians to rein him in. In the midst of battle Apollo stood by the Scaean Gate, cloaked in mist, waiting for Paris and Achilles to come together. As Paris drew his bow, the Archer God sped the arrow which pierced Achilles through his heel, his only vulnerable part. The blood drained quickly from the wound and Achilles died.

'Achilles was brave beyond compare,' Mantes voiced a mild epitaph, 'and a cause of courage in others. In the web of destiny, he served justice. Though not wholly worthy of praise, he did great deeds,

suffered and died. He is remembered. That is enough.'

The body of Achilles was burnt on a funeral pyre, his ashes mixed with those of Patroclus, and his possessions distributed among his companions. Ajax, son of Telamon, fiercest in battle after the dead hero, claimed his arms. But Agamemnon, valuing cunning above strength, awarded the prized weapons to Odysseus, a decision which drove Ajax mad. He attacked a flock of sheep in mistake for Odysseus and his men. When he woke from his fit, and saw what he had done, he killed himself for shame.

Events foretold by the oracle long ago had come to pass. For the Trojans, the killing of Achilles was only a fleeting triumph. With his death the city of Troy began to die also. But the conditions for a Greek victory were not quite fulfilled, as the Palladium still stood secure in the shrine on the citadel.

Then Calchas, the prophet, spoke once more: 'The stricken tree totters, but before it falls Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, must replace his father. And Philoctetes must bring to Troy the bow and arrows of Heracles.'

When red-headed Neoptolemus was brought from Scyros, Odysseus dressed him in his father's armour, an image that still had power to put terror in the Trojans. With greater difficulty, long-abandoned Philoctetes was rescued from the rock off Lemnos and brought to Troy, either through a trick or with the promise of a cure for his still-festering wound. Machaon, the surgeon, cured him with a poultice of wine and herbs, and soon Philoctetes repaid this care by shooting Paris with one of Heracles' poisoned arrows.

Then Odysseus was free to turn his scheming mind to the capture of the Palladium. He and Diomedes put their clever heads together. Odysseus had himself whipped until he bled. Dressed in rags he went by night as a fugitive to the Trojan gate, howling curses against the Greeks. The gatekeepers admitted him in sympathy and bathed his wounds. But in the dark he sneaked away and killed the sleeping guards of the Palladium. He hefted the large image onto his broad shoulders and carried it to the main town sewer and floated with the foul refuse beneath the walls to the waiting Diomedes outside.

The ripe fruit was almost in hand. All the Greeks had to do now was to reach for it. Athene, the greatest of their protectors, inspired them with the plan. She commanded the craftsman Epeius to take planks of the best fir and build a wooden horse with a hollow interior large enough for fifty picked fighting men. Then, with a great show of despondence, the Greek fleet sailed away, but only as far as Tenedos, leaving Sinon behind, a most plausible fellow and a grandson of the trickster Autolycus. Sinon went to the puzzled Trojans with a tale of woe, crying out against his cold-hearted companions who had run for

home and left him at the mercy of the enemy. And when the Trojans enquired about this curious wooden horse, Sinon pointed to the inscription: 'An offering to Holy Athene, in gratitude for our safe departure from this accursed shore.'

Though the horse was too big to fit through the city gates, Sinon promised the Trojans that its presence within the walls would make the city forever safe from further invasion. Cassandra cried out when she heard this, for she feared the Greeks bearing gifts. And the seer Laocoon added his doom-laden voice to hers. But when two sea-serpents crushed Laocoon and his sons to death, the Trojans believed Sinon. They tore down part of their impregnable, god-built walls and pulled the wooden horse into the city.

Listening to the jubilation of the enemy, the Greeks in the belly of the horse waited for night. Some suspicious Trojans tried to thrust spears and swords between the planks, and Helen called to heroes she had once known, imitating the voices of their wives. Homesick warriors jumped up to reply, but Odysseus pulled them down with a hand over their mouths. The Greek fleet had crept back from Tenedos and was hove-to just off shore. In the night, when Troy was dizzy with joy and wine, Sinon lit the beacon to recall the ships. They grounded softly on the beach. Then Epeius opened the trap door in the horse and let down the rope-ladder. Grim men emerged, with faces strained for slaughter.

The horror began. Ten years of rage and frustration were visited on the people of Troy. Few were spared, not children, not mothers with babes at the breast. Men, youths, grandfathers, honoured matrons were put to the sword, but the best of the young women were taken as concubines. Priam and Hecabe took refuge at an altar of Zeus where the weak arm of the old king made one last feeble thrust at Neoptolemus. Contemptuously, the son of Achilles cut him down. Antenor, the respected advocate of peace, had a better fate. Menelaus hung a panther's skin at his door, as a sign that he should be saved. Deiphobus, the new guardian of Helen after the death of Paris, could expect no such mercy from her husband. Menelaus hunted him to his home and killed him in the heart of his family.

After the slaughter came the division of the spoils. Lesser Ajax captured Cassandra and dragged her from the temple of Athene. But Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief, claimed the prophetess for himself. Neoptolemus, in his father's name, took Hector's widow, Andromache, and Odysseus grubbed up the very roots of that heroic family by throwing her little son, Astyanax, from the walls. Even the dead shared the plunder. Achilles appeared in a dream, demanding the sacrifice of Priam's youngest daughter, Polyxena, and threatening to withhold the homeward winds until this was done. Agamemnon

shuddered at this cruelty. But Calchas overruled him. Polyxena was slain on the tomb of Achilles and the good winds began to blow.

When the killing was done, Queen Hecabe stood almost alone in the bloody ruins of city, friends, family and home. In the division of the prizes, she fell to Odysseus. He accepted her, but what use is a grief-stricken old woman? She was more a token and an evil reminder than a prize. The gods had pity on her and turned her into one of the savage black dogs that follow Hecate. In wild Chersonese, far from home, she howled her despair over a cold sea and disappeared under the waves.

The great act was finished. The Fates closed the last chapter in the long history of Troy. The Greeks set fire to the dead city and sailed away on the favourable wind.

At midday, grateful for a little, crooked patch of shade. They were silent, overwhelmed by heat and history.

In a while the old soldier said: 'Is this the meaning of that woman? How is it that we Greeks can forgive her still?'

And Mantes, after long thought, answered, 'This also I have wondered, and I reply to you in the words of another poet, a Greek like you and me. "For ten years we staggered on the shore, giving our blood that the image we had of Helen might be clothed once more with warm human flesh. After ten years of pleading and agony, she came. She came! When Menelaus lifted her high in his arms and, striding through the smouldering palace, past the carcass of Priam, the thresholds of Troy and the pebbles of the shore, plunged waist deep into the sea and placed her aboard his ship, all the Greeks turned pale as they saw the beauty of the incomparable woman.

"Generations passed, but Helen still stirs in song, sits at the law-givers' tables and at the gatherings of the common folk. In the evening she goes to the beds of the newly-weds, like a bride, and all the daughters of Greece bear her resemblance. She is the woman of the Greeks.

"Blessed be the gods! Before our blood and song gave her birth, Helen was a shadow, trembling like all women, without hope of eternity upon the earth. She walked through the canebrake of the Eurotas, sat at the loom, directed her servants, moved up and down the palace like a shade. She would have died as if she had never lived.

"But suddenly our poets passed by and caught sight of her, and like the sea, the song rose up and took her, and made her our own, and then gave her to the world forever."



Dancing Girl

WANDERING MEN

S the Great Gods, Mantes gave thanks at the shrine of
For him, this was a refuge and a completion. In his lifetime of
service to the Muses and to the Holy Ones, Mantes had never before
been to remote Samothrace, the storm-tossed island of the northern
seas. Yet this was one of the most venerable of sanctuaries, and also
the most hospitable. Greek or barbarian, man or woman, citizen or
slave – all were welcomed into the mysteries. Now the home of the
Great Gods, Samothrace at first, before even the coming of the Greeks,
had been dedicated to the Great Goddess. First, she was primeval Ge,
our Mother Earth. Then she was Axierus, goddess of the unknown
tribes. She was Phrygian Cybele. She was Greek Demeter. She was
Persephone, Guardian of the Dead.

Into these maternal arms mankind came with a simple intent: to
seek happiness in the earthly life and peace in the Underworld. And
here Mantes joined the initiates in procession by night, advancing by
torches along a path on which there was hardly a level footstep. From
the crags mountain goats peered down with insatiable curiosity. The
ritual was easy, the requirements few. In the sanctuary, the initiates
put on white chitons and the priest of the cult showed them certain
symbolic objects, which alone must remain secret. That was all. After
the ceremony the initiates wore an iron bracelet, representing the
power of the earth, and around their hips they wound a large cloth,
which promised protection against the sea. For the Great Gods had the
care of navigation in their hands, and lofty, snow-tinged Mount
Phengari was a beacon for sailors, and the little coves of the island
were a haven to ships when Poseidon raged in this turbulent, wind-
swept corner of the Aegean Sea.

‘Blessed are the Great Gods,’ Mantes sang, celebrating his own
release from the sea, ‘who safeguard all friends, all strangers on land
and sea. Here is the sanctuary we need, for all Greeks are wanderers,
in life and in the imagination.’

War and prayer for peace and rest. But Athene sent a storm that whirled them helplessly onwards. The struggle was not over, for who in a ten-years' war could say he had not sinned? And the gods do not forget.

Ajax, son of Oileus, began this trouble. At the sack of Troy he had pulled down a statue of Athene which Cassandra clung to as he tried to rape her. The statue lay on the ground, outraged eyes pointing skyward. When Ajax went unpunished by the Greeks for this sacrilege, Athene sent the storm that wrecked the returning fleet at Cape Caphereus in Euboea. She herself smashed Ajax' ship with a thunderbolt, but he swam to a rock and boasted of his escape from the will of heaven. When Poseidon heard this ranting, he sent a wave that knocked the wind out of Ajax and drowned him.

After the storm, Demophon, son of Theseus, was driven into Thrace while trying to make his way back to Athens. In the new land he married Phyllis, daughter of the king, and then left for his old home. When he did not return, she hanged herself and was changed into an almond tree, which bore neither leaves nor fruit until her repentant husband came back and put his arms around the trunk and kissed the tree.

Many others were drowned in the storm but Diomedes and Neoptolemus, two favourites of the gods, survived. Athene saved Diomedes but Aphrodite had not forgiven him for wounding her with a spear-thrust before the walls. When he returned to Argos he found his wife thick in adultery and the people of the city turned against him. He took refuge in the temple of Hera, then fled to Italy and lived out unhappy days in exile. Neoptolemus, however, did not sail with the fleet since he had been warned of the danger by the sea-goddess Thetis. Instead, he went by land across Thrace and Macedonia, conquered the Molossians and made a kingdom for himself. But Apollo called him to justice for his cruel slaughter of Priam, which defiled the altar of Zeus. When Neoptolemus seized Hermione, Apollo put hatred in the heart of Orestes, to whom she had been promised, and he killed Neoptolemus at the sacred grove in Delphi.

At the fall of Troy, Menelaus took Helen to his ship and cast off as quickly as possible. His parting with Agamemnon on the beach had been bitter, an argument among drunken soldiers, and the two brothers never met again. In his haste to get away Menelaus neglected to make a sacrifice to Athene, so the goddess marked him down and Apollo shot the pilot of his little fleet. All but five of his ships were lost in the storms of the return. Menelaus was blown to Crete. For eight years he was battered around southern and eastern seas, seeking friendly winds but never finding them, sailing to Cyprus, Phoenicia,

Ethiopia, Libya and, finally, Egypt. Proteus, one of the changeable gods of the sea, had charge of these winds and only he could send Menelaus back to Sparta.

After eight years Menelaus caught up with Proteus; hid among the seals of the sea-god's flock when they gathered on Pharos, and then grappled with the slippery god. Subdued at last, Proteus told him that his brother Agamemnon was murdered and that Menelaus must return to Egypt, to appease the gods by sacrifice. Menelaus made offerings on the banks of the Nile and built a memorial to his brother. Then the winds relented and took Menelaus and Helen safely back to their homeland.

How subtly, and with what cruel irony, did the Fates pursue the curse of the House of Atreus against the two brothers. Menelaus did hard penance on alien shores amid other peoples and other gods. At last the gods allowed him home, and he and Helen settled into the exhausted peace of age, their passion spent, their great adventure a story for other generations. But Agamemnon, the elder son of Atreus, came triumphantly home from Troy with hardly a stumble. Hera led him safely through Athene's storm. With all the pomp and dignity of a conqueror, he landed at Nauplia, kissed his native ground, and wept for joy.

But his wife, Clytemnestra, hated him. He had married her by force, killing her first husband, Tantalus, and the child at her breast. He had taken Iphigenia, her prettiest daughter, and had sanctioned her for sacrifice. He had wasted ten years in war, in men's futile business. And now, if the rumour she heard was correct, he was coming home with Cassandra as his Trojan concubine.

Aegisthus, son of Thyestes and the sworn enemy of the sons of Atreus, knew Clytemnestra's turmoil of mind. While Agamemnon was away he took the chance to harm her husband. He flattered Clytemnestra and won the way to her bed and became her lover, despite the warning of Hermes, for they were satisfied both in body and in the spirit of revenge. Then they conspired to murder Agamemnon and his Trojan slut, whomever she might be. For a year, Clytemnestra posted a watchman on the palace roof at Mycenae, to give her notice of her husband's return. When the news came, she and her lover were ready.

Agamemnon and Cassandra climbed from the port on a torrid day, a day over-burdened with sunlight. Behind, the plain of Argos was covered by the mirage of the heat, like a lake on fire. The feet of the travellers dragged, despite Agamemnon's anxiety to be home, and their tongues were parched. But what comfort could Mycenae offer? To Cassandra, it seemed a fearful place. The citadel sat powerfully on its rock, above a gorge, flanked by two grey mountains. The walls

built by the Cyclopes were enormous and threatening, too large for humans, as if built to contain some colossal outrage, some deep insult to the gods.

Clytemnestra stood smiling at the gate of the palace. The purple covering of welcome lay over the steps. The bath was ready, the women of the palace were even now adding the last sweet herbs to the water. The feast was prepared. Agamemnon set his foot within the door. But Cassandra, the doom-saying Trojan prophetess whom none believed, could not go on. With the smell of blood in her nostrils, she cried out in despair and stood like stone.

In the bath-house Agamemnon was refreshed. The toil and the bitterness of years flowed away with the water and he was ready now for the feast. As he stepped from the bath Clytemnestra came forward with what seemed to be a towel. But it was a seamless net which she threw over his head, and then Aegisthus struck him two savage blows with a sword. Though Agamemnon was already dying, Clytemnestra made certain with the stroke of an axe which beheaded him. She wiped her axe and her blood-spattered hands on her husband's hair and ran outside to kill Cassandra with the same weapon.

When the deed was done the murderous lovers became king and queen of Mycenae and ruled for eight years. By then, Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, had come to manhood and the gods reminded him of his duty to his father. The oracle at Delphi demanded the death of Clytemnestra and her lover, though this course was full of danger, for matricide also called for vengeance and the Furies would not let Orestes rest. In disguise, Orestes went to the palace in Mycenae and pretended to his mother that her son was dead. Clytemnestra was relieved. She had been oppressed by bad omens, dreaming that a serpent sucked both milk and blood from her breast. She and Aegisthus relaxed their vigilance. Then Orestes drew his sword, killed Aegisthus, and turned on his mother. She bared her breast and begged for mercy, but Apollo hardened Orestes' heart and he beheaded her, just as she had done to Agamemnon.

After the fall of Troy, one man, at least, knew that he would see his home again. Odysseus, who had taken the road to Troy so reluctantly, had the promise of the oracle that he would return to his native Ithaca. Son of Laertes, Odysseus was the grandson of Autolycus, famous among all mankind for quick wits and sharp practice. On the plains of Troy, Odysseus had demonstrated his lineage, proving himself to be the most intelligent and cunning of the Greeks. He had endured the war. Now, in time of peace, he would survive whatever happened.

Only one thing clouded the certain knowledge of his return. He knew also that his journey home would take him ten more years.

Odysseus left Troy with a fleet of twelve ships and headed northwest into the Chersonese. Odysseus was a man of the Ionian Sea. The enclosed eastern waters of the Aegean were strange to him. In the manner of Greek sailors he intended to hug the coast, a broad, short man standing astride the tiller, shrewd eyes scanning the shoreline, assessing as always the profit and loss of action or inaction.

At the first landfall, he lost his Trojan captive. Queen Hecabe, Priam's widow and his prize, took the form of a black dog and, too sad to live, vanished into the sea. Landing again further along the coast of Thrace, Odysseus' men made an unprovoked and bloodthirsty attack on a town of the Cicones, sparing only the priest of Apollo, who gave them in gratitude some wineskins full of the strongest wine. While they were sampling the drink and celebrating their easy triumph, the Greeks were surprised by a sudden counterattack which left many dead, forced the remainder to tumble aboard ship and run into a northeast gale that drove the little fleet helplessly south towards the island of Cythera. During a lull in the weather, off Cape Malea, Odysseus tried to round the point and make the short passage up the Ionian Sea to Ithaca. But the wind redoubled in strength and tore him away again to the south, far from his home, to the land of the Lotus-Eaters.

This was a land of dreams. Those who ate the fruit of the lotus forgot the pain and effort of living. The past was closed to them, and the present a mysterious interlude. But for ten years the men of Odysseus had seen blood, horror and the intimacies of death, and why should they not reach now for some blessed state? Some willingly took the fruit and sank to the grass beneath shady trees, listening to the play of the breeze and watching the clouds soar away. But Odysseus roused them with the point of his sword and herded them back to the boats. Man was made for resolution and endurance, not for the sleep of forgetfulness.

The ships sailed on into unknown waters. After a time, needing meat and fresh water, the crews landed on a small, verdant, wooded island, ringing with the plaintive calls of many sheep and goats. No humans were in view. Exploring with one ship on the other side of the island, Odysseus saw a large, airy cave to which he and his men took a goatskin of wine, intending to shelter for the night. Inside, they found meat and milk and cheese, and they were just preparing a meal when a giant with a single eye in the middle of his forehead drove a flock of sheep into the cave and secured the entrance with a massive boulder.

'What?' the giant rumbled in an ugly voice. 'Visitors?'

‘We are only poor strangers, driven here by ill winds and the will of the gods,’ Odysseus answered humbly. ‘In the name of Zeus we ask for your hospitality.’

The giant only laughed. Then he caught two of the men, cracked their heads against the rock and began to eat their flesh.

Fate had brought the unlucky Greeks to the home of Polyphemos, a son of Poseidon, one of the race of Cyclopes who had formerly served the gods as craftsmen and blacksmiths. In time, these Cyclopes had degenerated into brutal, ignorant monsters, living lonely lives in island caves and wholly dependent on their flocks for livelihood. In a sleepless night Odysseus wracked his brains. He and his men might kill the giant, but how would they escape from the cave? A team of twenty oxen could hardly move the door-stone.

In the morning, Polyphemos ate two more men and left with his flock, carefully replacing the boulder behind him. During the day Odysseus found in the cave a heavy log of well-seasoned olive wood which he sharpened into a stake, hardening the point in the embers of the fire. Then in the evening, when Polyphemos returned with the flock and satisfied his hunger with two more victims, Odysseus offered him some of the strong wine he had brought from the Cicones. The wine loosened the giant’s surly tongue. ‘Tell me, little man,’ he asked Odysseus, ‘what is your name?’

‘My name is Nobody,’ Odysseus replied solemnly.

Polyphemos giggled. ‘Well, Mr Nobody, in return for your gift of wine I’ll do you a favour. I’ll eat you last.’

At that, the giant rolled onto the ground and began to snore. In the night, Odysseus heated the stake and drove it deep into the round eye of the drunken Cyclopes. Polyphemos woke blinded and roaring with pain, bringing his fellow Cyclopes running from distant caves.

‘What is the cause of this fearful noise?’ they called out.

‘Nobody has blinded me,’ Polyphemos answered.

‘Is that all? Most likely, you have a fever. Pray to your father Poseidon for relief.’ And they went away grumbling.

When morning came, Polyphemos had to let out his flock for water and pasture. He pushed aside the stone and crouched in the entrance, to feel each animal as it passed. But Odysseus had fastened the sheep in threes and tied one of his men beneath each group of three. Then he himself clutched the thick, long wool under the largest ram. At the entrance of the cave the giant ran his hands over the back of each animal but found no one. The ram was the last to leave.

‘You are usually the first to leap from the cave,’ Polyphemos said tenderly, groping in the fleece on the ram’s back. ‘Have you stayed to comfort me in my agony? Go on, old friend, the pasture awaits you.’

With a bound the ram was out of the cave and Odysseus was free.

He and his men ran for the ship but when they were safely offshore he could not restrain his triumph.

‘Listen, Cyclopes,’ he shouted. ‘It was not Nobody who blinded you. It was I, Odysseus of Ithaca.’

In rage and pain Polyphemus prayed to Poseidon for revenge and hurled vast lumps of the earth towards the voice that taunted him. Blindly aimed, the volley of rocks fell short, only raising a circle of waves on which the ship rode to safety. But Poseidon heard the petition of his son Polyphemus, and the Earth-Shaker did not forget the name of Odysseus.

Joining the rest of the fleet, Odysseus sailed north to the island of Aeolia, where Aeolus, Lord of the Winds, greeted the wanderers with much kindness. He entertained them for a month and then gave Odysseus a large sack in which the more unruly winds were imprisoned, leaving only Zephyrus, the gentle West Wind, free to blow the fleet swiftly to Ithaca. Under bright skies Odysseus steered the fleet until smoke from the hearths of Ithaca came in sight. Then, overcome by fatigue, he slept. As he rested, his crew untied the sack, hoping to find gold and jewels. In a moment, the angry winds rushed out, caught the sails of the ships in their arms and hurried home. But Aeolus would have nothing more to do with men who misused his gift. Obviously, these sailors were not favoured by the gods. They were not worthy to have the winds as their servants. In future, they had better row.

They rowed laboriously for seven days then came to a land of high, broken mountains under a gloomy sky. Glad for any relief, the other captains took their ships into the narrow jaws of the harbour, which was closed in by steep cliffs. But Odysseus did not like the look of the country and anchored out in the bay. It was as well that he did so, for the Laestrygones, the savages of the land, attacked and destroyed all the ships in the harbour. Then the savages began a leisurely feast on the bodies of the dead. Sick at heart but unable to prevent this massacre, Odysseus cut his anchor-rope and fled with his one remaining ship.

A long voyage east took him to the island of Aeaea, near the realm of Dawn, where the great sorceress Circe lived in the midst of her enchantments. After so long at sea, the island looked peaceful and pleasant under a mild sky, but Odysseus and his men were suspicious. In the toil of their homecoming, they had been hurt by too many alarms and surprises. Cautiously, Eurylochus, the second-in-command, took a party of men to investigate. At a clearing in the woods they came to a fine house in a glade in which many wild animals were prowling. The men drew back, afraid. But these animals seemed to have forgotten their wild habits, and instead of attacking they came

forward eagerly to lick the hands of the strangers and to fawn at their feet. From within the house there was the sound of a loom, and of a woman's voice singing the contented songs of the hearth and the home. Eurylochus called, 'Who's there?' Then Circe came to the door with her arms held out in greeting and invited the strangers to enter and eat and rest.

Eurylochus, still full of suspicion, refused to go in. But the rest of the men entered at once. There was something in the quiet glade, in the peaceful house, in the calm figure of the sorceress that reminded them of homes and families so long unseen. Men used to the seafarer's ration of hardtack and salted meat and water from a mouldy barrel willingly sat at a table laden with barley cakes, cheese, milk, curds, honey and fruit. When they had eaten and were lying back with a cup of wine, Eurylochus, who was spying through the window, saw Circe rise from her place and touch each man with her staff. Instantly, the men were transformed into swine which Circe drove out of doors with kicks and blows. They joined the throng of beasts outside in the glade, those who also had once been humans.

When Odysseus heard what had happened he was furious and reached instinctively for his sword. But an enchantress was no ordinary enemy and Odysseus was not sure what to do until Hermes met him on the path and gave him a magic herb called moly, which would make him safe against the spells of Circe. Now he could fight magic with magic. At the house, Circe charmed him and feasted him, as she had done to the others, but when she struck him with her magic staff Odysseus took her by the hair and held his sword at her throat. Circe begged for her life. She offered him her riches, her bed, all the langorous delights of the enchanted island. She spread ointment on the backs of the swine, bringing his crew back to human form but younger and more handsome than before. Then Odysseus agreed to stay with her and comfort her in her loneliness.

For a year, Odysseus and his men lived at ease in the strange luxury of Aeaea until they grew homesick for their own land. But when, and how, would Odysseus be allowed to see his homeland again? He was beginning to despair, and though Circe was willing to help him, even her witch's eyes could not read the book of his future. She told him that he must seek out the shade of Teiresias in the kingdom of Hades, who would lay before him the will of heaven. So Odysseus' ship ran on the North Wind to the place where Circe had directed him, to the grove of Persephone where sad willows drooped over the Rivers of the Dead. Here, by the entrance to Tartarus, Odysseus dug a pit and filled it with the blood of sacrificial ewes. Ghosts of the dead welled up from the Fields of Asphodel to drink the blood. But Odysseus drew his sword and kept them at bay. He was waiting for Teiresias.

The shade of Elpenor came first, the youngest of the crew who had died in a drunken fall on the island of Circe but a few days before. His body lay unburied and he gazed reproachfully at Odysseus, pleading for remembrance. Then came many shades, old and young, and among them was Odysseus' own mother, Anticleia, whom Odysseus wept to see. But still Odysseus held them back. Then Teiresias slowly advanced, with blind steps, and drank deeply of the blood.

'Lord Odysseus,' he said in thanks, 'home is sweet and return lightens man's heart. But Poseidon, the Earth-Shaker, has set himself in your path. He hates you because you blinded his giant son Polyphemus. You shall not escape his anger, though you may yet return to your beloved Ithaca.'

After this warning, Teiresias as pointed out to Odysseus the many dangers that lay ahead. He told him to keep a tight hold on his crew, lest suffering make them foolish and rebellious, and in particular to stay well clear of the cattle belonging to the Sun. If Odysseus did return to Ithaca, he would find the island changed, with much trouble in his own house, and a struggle to be taken up against brutal men. And even then his journey was not finished. At last, death would come to him from the sea.

When Odysseus had thanked Teiresias, he put down his sword and let the other ghosts come to the trench to drink. Anticleia had her fill and blessed him. Three times they tried to embrace, but her shade slipped through his arms and departed. Then a throng of the famous dead jostled for the blood. Noble women related to Odysseus their tales of passion and jealousy, and old companions from the fall of Troy mixed memory and regret. Ajax, son of Telamon, stood there, still sulking, and mighty Achilles, unreconciled to death. Odysseus was surprised to see Agamemnon, chief of the Greeks, and learnt from him the horror of his homecoming and death. When the heroes were gone, Odysseus saw others who suffered in Tartarus for their crimes. Even Heracles strode by, scattering the dead like birds from the new corn, and commiserated with Odysseus on the pains of life, and death.

Leaving the borders of Tartarus, Odysseus returned to Aeaea, to give young Elpenor the burial he craved. Next day at dawn, Circe wished him a fond farewell and warned him, adding her voice to that of Teiresias, how to overcome the enmity of Poseidon and the rage of the sea. A good wind carried the ship away, towards the island of the Sirens, whose heart-rending songs drifted out on the dying breeze. As Circe had commanded, Odysseus stopped the ears of his men with wax and ordered them to row swiftly by. But he had himself tied to the mast, for he longed to hear the Sirens' perilous music. And though he stormed and pleaded to be released when the music reached him, so that he might rush to join the Sirens, Eurylochus only tightened the

ropes and grimly kept rowing.

Now, the course set by the helmsman took them towards a notorious danger, for the ship could not avoid the narrow strait where Scylla and Charybdis lived and menaced every passing boat. Scylla, with six long necks and six vicious heads, dwelt high in the steep sheer cliff that bordered one side of the narrows. With her weaving necks, she reached down and plucked sailors from the decks of ships which hugged the foot of the cliff. On the other side of the strait, amid the spray and din of rushing water, Charybdis lived under the sea. Deep below a rock with an ancient fig tree, this monster sucked the water into a dizzy whirlpool three times a day, dragging unwary ships into the depths then spewing them up in broken pieces.

Circe had advised Odysseus to chance his luck with Scylla, since Charybdis was too strong even for Poseidon to withstand. At the mouth of the narrows the rowers nearly burst their lungs with effort and the boat went with the speed of fear. But Odysseus steered a little too close to the cliff. The necks stretched out and six jaws snapped on six of the crew. In an instant they were plucked howling into the air, but Odysseus did not dare to pause or turn back. He had nothing but prayers to offer his slaughtered men.

After the terror of the narrows the crew, grief-stricken and exhausted, saw ahead the welcome shelter of the island of Thrinacia, where Helius, the Sun-God, pastured his large herds of placid, well-fed cattle. Odysseus remembered the warnings from Teiresias and Circe and wished to sail on. But his men were on the edge of revolt and demanded a time to rest. Reluctantly, Odysseus landed and made all the crew swear that they would not touch even the least of the Sun's sacred cattle. The island was a pleasant place to sleep and dream of home but the winds remained contrary, blowing hard onto the shore, and the ship could not get away. For a month the men held to their oath. In a while food grew scarce and the men started to eye the cattle. Then, as Odysseus slept, they killed several cows and roasted enough meat for six days of feasting.

A sacrifice was made to Helius, but the Sun-God was not placated. When the wind shifted and the ship, as if in shame, sped from the scene of the sacrilege, Helius called to Zeus for justice. In the storm that followed the Thunderer split the ship with a thunderbolt, sank it and drowned all but Odysseus. He clung to a piece of wreckage, which was carried by wind and tide inexorably back towards Charybdis. Just as the water was sucked into the whirlpool, Odysseus lunged upwards and caught a sturdy branch of the great, overhanging fig tree. Desperately he hung there until Charybdis flung the wreckage out. Then Odysseus regained his raft of broken planks and floated away for nine days until he drifted ashore on the island of Ogygia where

Calypso, a daughter of Thetis, entangled him once more in the delights of love.

For seven years Odysseus satisfied the nymph Calypso. She was ardent and loving, and he returned her passion. But the long days drifted by and his heart grew cool. He remembered, more and more, his distant island home, his faithful Penelope, his son, Telemachus. He became distracted, sitting many hours on the shore, gazing at the swell and ebb of the sea. Athene saw his state of mind, and pitied him, and went to Zeus to plead his cause. Zeus was sympathetic. The will of the gods was not that Odysseus should grow thin and sad in the chains of an over-loving bed. Zeus sent Hermes to order his release from Ogygia.

Forlornly, Calypso let him go, for who can resist the decision of Zeus? She told him to build a boat and helped him with wood and tools and cloth for the sail. In four days it was finished. On the fifth, she provisioned it with stores and water and a goatskin of wine. Then she bathed Odysseus, touching so lightly the scars of war on his sturdy body, and dressed him like a bridegroom in the richest clothes. She kissed him, and set him free on a fair wind.

He sailed away most peacefully. For seventeen days, as Calypso had advised him, he kept his eyes on the firmament of heaven. Under the kindly influence of the Pleiades he moved serenely, keeping the Bear always on the left hand. Then Poseidon, returning from a long visit to the far-flung Ethiopians, noticed the lonely boat on the dark sea and burst out in anger.

‘Treachery! Behind my back, the gods deceive me. They have sent Odysseus sneaking towards the land of the Phaeacians. But I’m not finished with him yet. He shall have his fill of troubles.’

He massed the clouds and churned the ocean with his trident. Roaring winds came rushing to his call. Lightning lanced through a blue-black sky, the foundations of the earth shook, and a wave as tall as a temple flooded over the boat. Encumbered by his heavy robes, Odysseus was on the point of drowning when Ino-Leucothea, a spirit of the seas, fluttered over him in the form of a seagull. Giving him a veil, which she was carrying in her mouth, she ordered him to throw off his clothes, wind the veil around his waist and plunge boldly into the waves. The celestial veil would take him safely to Scheria, the land at the end of the world where the Phaeacians lived, which already showed dimly in the distance, like a shield looming in the storm of battle.

Poseidon, in his golden chariot, watched the rescue from above. ‘This time you go safely,’ he grumbled, half-satisfied. ‘Though my brother Zeus favours you now, know that your misfortunes are not at an end.’ With that, he whipped his horses back to Aegae in a

turbulence of tossing manes and flying hooves.

For two more days Odysseus struggled through angry seas towards the shore. He could find no foothold among jagged rocks. But Athene calmed the breaking waves and guided him to a river mouth where Odysseus could drag his bruised and swollen body onto warm sand. He kissed the land, threw the magic veil back to sea as he had promised Leucothea, and collapsed, all naked, into the shelter of some seaside bushes. In a few moments, he was asleep.

While he slept, Nausicaa, daughter of King Alcinous, came with her handmaidens to wash clothes on the banks of the river. When the washing was done, the girls began to play, tossing a ball hand to hand until one missed her catch and the ball fell in the stream. There was a shout of consternation and Odysseus woke with a start in the bushes.

When Odysseus stepped out of the bushes, hiding his nakedness inadequately behind a green branch, he looked like some grizzled sea-thing, with savage eyes and brine-streaked hair. The serving women fled but Nausicaa stood firm. And when silver-tongued Odysseus had explained his sorry state to her, she gladly helped him, giving him clothes and food, and sending him, hidden in Athene's cloud of mist, to plead his cause at the feet of Queen Arete. The queen's heart also softened at the tale told by the master of eloquence. Under gentle pressure from his queen, Alcinous promised to make all things good for this travel-stained stranger, to provide a ship and honourable presents, and a safe passage back to Ithaca. But before the ship sailed, there would be an offering to the gods, and royal games, and a feast worthy of a noble guest, for hospitality is a sacred duty of all mankind.

Next day, in the great hall, when stomachs were satisfied and the wine was flowing, the bard Demodocus took up his lyre and began to sing the well-loved songs, of gods and destiny, of great deeds, of mighty men and lovely women. Blind Demodocus struck the first bold chord and all fell silent. He sang of the trials of war, of wounds and death-agony in the long battle for Troy, of heroic contests on the arid plain. The listeners were sitting in rapt attention. But Odysseus drew his crimson cloak over his head to hide his tears. Then Alcinous stopped the bard and asked his guest the cause of his trouble.

Odysseus answered: 'I am Odysseus, Laertes' son, that same man of whom you sing. All the world knows my subtle ways, and my fame goes up to heaven. In the maze of my wanderings I see no country better than my own dear Ithaca, and yet I cannot reach it.'

Then without pause, in the grief of exile, he recounted to the court the full history of his journeys and his struggle.

At dawn on the next day, Alcinous gave Odysseus many presents and put him aboard one of his swiftest ships, which flew like some

great sea bird safely to Ithaca. Worn out by time and travel, Odysseus was asleep when the ship dropped anchor in the little bay of Phorcys. Without waking him, the sailors set him softly on the beach, with his gifts around him, and went quietly on their way.

But Poseidon, no longer able to hurt Odysseus, expended one last burst of fury on the Phaeacians. As their ship reached home, he turned it to stone with a blow of his hand. Let mankind learn, once and for all, not to try the temper of the Earth-Shaker.

A Mantis the storyteller reflected on the homecoming of Odysseus. It is a marvellous story, a Greek story, composed of blue sea, storms, shipwreck, danger, and the safety of mysterious islands. Odysseus kept Ithaca always in mind, but the gods did not let him hurry. And they were right. When he left Ithaca, twenty years before, he had been notable for cunning and devious ways, with a head full of stratagems. He returned old in years and wise in experience, his mind stored with riches beyond cunning, a new wealth gained from gods and giants, cannibals and savages, witches and nymphs. Ithaca, when he returned, was the same poor place, a rock with a little earth in the folds, fig trees, olives, lean cattle, leaner children, cracked pots on the doorsteps with bright flowers, and within, pale girls weaving and singing: "Loom of gold, ivory comb..."

'He knew now that his journey would never end, but Ithaca had nothing more to teach him. Odysseus had in his hands the reins of his life. The horses of desire and ambition were tamed. They were pulling him towards what he knew to be his destiny. But first, there was work to be done.'

When Odysseus awoke, on a strange beach, his first thought was for his treasure. While he was hiding it, Athene stepped out of the morning mist, told him where he was and explained the state of unhappy Ithaca. One hundred and twenty idle suitors were laying siege to Queen Penelope, convinced that Odysseus was dead, wasting his patrimony and eating her out of house and home. Laertes, his father, had withdrawn from the court in grief and disgust. Telemachus, his son, was searching abroad for news of his father and the suitors planned to murder the young man when he returned. Penelope, his faithful wife, fought off the suitors. She said she could make no decision until she had finished Laertes' shroud. For three years, she wove by day and unpicked the cloth by night. But her trick was now known and the suitors were angry.

When Athene had told Odysseus all these troubles, she disguised him in a beggar's rags and sent him to the hut of Eumaeus, an old

swineherd still true to his absent master.

Athene summoned Telemachus from Sparta and father and son were reunited in the swineherd's hut, though neither Eumaeus nor Penelope was yet let into the secret. Cautious Odysseus had a plot to prepare, which was best done with fewest helpers. Taking stock of the enemy at the palace, beggarly Odysseus got only a kick from the goatherd Melantheus, but the old hunting-dog Argus, dying on the dung-heap, recognized his long-lost master and feebly stirred his scabby tail.

Inside the palace, Odysseus found the suitors idling the day away with drink and boastful chatter. He begged for alms in the name of charity but the suitors greeted him with abuse and blows. Antinous, their chief, having thrown a stool at Odysseus, then thought it a pleasant joke to match this new beggar with Irus, a sturdy rogue who hung about the fringes of the table. A prize of blood and bones was offered to the winner. Odysseus tucked up his rags for the contest, surprising all with his powerful muscles. Contemptuously, he felled Irus with one blow.

But Penelope, when she heard of these scenes of riot in her own hall, was ashamed and sent for this unlikely beggar. He had travelled far and might have news of her husband. Still Odysseus did not reveal himself. Instead, he told Penelope a long and pitiful tale which made her weep, and she called for the old nurse Eurycleia to bathe the legs and feet of this long-suffering wanderer. As she did so, the nurse recognized a scar on Odysseus' thigh, the result of a hunting wound from long ago. Before she could cry out, Odysseus gripped her by the throat and hissed, 'Speak at your peril.'

Next day was a feast of Apollo and Odysseus had his plan ready. He told Telemachus to remove all weapons from the hall during the night. Penelope was due to give her decision at the feast. The suitors had lost all patience and had given her an ultimatum. In the hall, when the feasting was done, she announced that she would marry the man who could string Odysseus' great bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axe-rings set in a row.

Still dressed as a beggar Odysseus watched from his lowly position by the door as suitor after suitor failed to bend the bow. Then Odysseus humbly asked if he might try, and Telemachus brought him the bow amid many shouts and insults from the amused suitors. Easily, Odysseus bent the stiff bow, and strung it, and gave the string a sharp twang. Still seated on his stool he pulled the string to its full extent and sent an arrow truly through the rings of the twelve axes. Telemachus ran to his father in the doorway, spear and sword in hand. The suitors sprang for their arms and armour but found them gone and the doors secured. They drew daggers and short swords and faced this presumptuous beggar. On the threshold, with the great door

barred behind him, Odysseus threw off his rags and declared himself. He planted his legs apart, steadily took up the bow and with his second arrow pierced the neck of Antinous.

The battle, though fierce, was not in doubt. Athene herself guided the hand of her favourite Odysseus, and sitting among the rafters in the form of a swallow she stiffened his resolve in the bad moments. All the suitors lay dead at last, and of their friends only the bard and the herald were spared, for by sacred custom their persons could not be touched. The serving-girls who had kept warm the suitors' beds were hanged in a row, and the goatherd Melantheus had his extremities chopped off and fed to the dogs.

In the great hall, after the lust of battle, Odysseus stood amid the shambles of the slain, bespattered in gore like a lion who has devoured an ox. Wearily, he summoned Eurycleia.

‘Nurse, fetch fire to purify this house, and sulphur to cleanse the pollution. Then seek out Penelope and bring her to me.’

There had been enough killing. Life, not death, was in his mind. It was time to start again.

But words, after so long an absence, were hard to find. Husband and wife, partly strangers now, sat each side of the cleansing fire, gazing in silence into the flames. When they began to talk, pain, resentment, recrimination poisoned their mouths until all hurts were out, and the slate was wiped clean. Then they looked on each other with new eyes, with the eyes of remembered love, and went quietly to their repose.

Strife was almost at an end. The families of the suitors called for revenge but Athene petitioned her father, Zeus, to stop the flow of blood. Zeus, the Reconciler, struck the ground between the enemies with a thunderbolt and all parties laid down their arms, in submission to the will of heaven. Only Poseidon was unsatisfied.

Then Odysseus made the last journey, as Teiresias had instructed him on the banks of the Styx. He took an oar on his shoulder and travelled to the wilds of Thesprotia, walking far into the mountains until he met a people who used no salt and mistook the oar for a winnowing-fan. Here, he planted the oar in the earth and sacrificed a ram and a bull and a boar to Poseidon. At last, the Earth-Shaker was pacified in his surly mind and granted Odysseus the gift of rest. He returned to Ithaca and waited, as it had been foretold, for death to come to him from the sea.

M above the breathing plasm of the Aegean, where the evening sun had burnt a violet trail through copper-coloured water and the rising morn was just now breaking over the flank of the hill, pale, but ready to

suffuse this hot world with tender, trembling light.

‘Odysseus, brother Greek,’ Mantes prayed for the wanderer and for all wanderers, ‘in my imagination I touch your closed eyes. Life is a flower, a breath, the morning dew, a moment at twilight. On all sides from where I stand, from the depths of the Aegean, from the bowels of this magic earth, there rises into the mind’s eye the race of men and women created under the maternal caress of this holy land where the gods live. That is what is substantial, and what endures.

‘O gods of Greece, I pray that my eyes too may close in such an hour as this, when only one way remains to express my sense of enchantment, to kneel and kiss my native ground, then to rise up and spread my arms wide in reverence, worshipping the soil and the water and the colour and the sky of Holy Greece.’

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